

COLLEGE STUDENT-SOLDIER: THE IMPACT OF READJUSTMENT ON AN ARMY
VETERAN

A CREATIVE PROJECT
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INTRODUCTION

Today's college student-veterans returning from conflict overseas face a readjustment period, which can be a difficult time for many, but not for all returning veterans. Some have trouble adjusting to civilian life; others are diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other emotional and relationship problems. These veterans may seem foreign to their family and friends. This creative project about the veteran readjustment aimed to address this contemporary issue through one Indiana Army National Guard veteran, whose experience can offer insight into other veterans' readjustment, although readjustment is different for every person and different for reserve and active duty military personnel.

Using narrative writing techniques like immersion, participant observation, saturation reporting, digression, and background research, this creative project was an in-depth literary journalism piece that followed Jessica Robinson from enlistment in the Indiana Army National Guard when she was seventeen, through deployment to Baghdad, Iraq, from May 2008 to March 2009, the transition period after she returned home and finished with graduation from Ball State University in May 2015 with a master's degree.

Despite her hardship of readjustment, Robinson's story ultimately shows how one veteran is still overcoming the struggles faced from this period. Additionally, she is working toward helping other veterans through a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling, a career shift resulting from her own readjustment period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition to the Civilian World

The first large influx of military personnel into higher education in the U.S. was due largely to the GI Bill or the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 following World War II. This funded training and postsecondary education for veterans. By 1950, two out of the fourteen million eligible used their GI Bill benefits, according to researchers Hamrick and Rumann.¹ Scholars Whiteman, Mroczek, MacDermid, Wadsworth, and Barry found the second large influx of veterans to college was the result of the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008, which financially assists those who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, such as Jessica Robinson.² The bill provides four years of tuition (average time to complete a bachelor's degree) and other financial benefits to veterans attending college. It applies to both public and private colleges.³

Since the bill's inaction in 2009, 877,000 people have received \$23.7 billion in education benefits, according to the *New York Times* and cited in *worldmag.com*.⁴ Additionally, from 2010 to 2013 the number participating more than doubled from 365,640 to 754,229.⁵ In August 2014, Congress passed a bill 91-3 that will require those public universities that want to continue

¹ Florence A. Hamrick and Corey B. Rumann, "Supporting Student Veterans in Transition," *New Directions for Student Services* 126 (Summer 2009): 25-34, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

² Shawn D. Whiteman et al., "The Development and Implications of Peer Emotional Support for Student Service Members/Veterans and Civilian College Students," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 60, no. 2 (2013): 265-278, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

³ Lucy Barnard-Brak et al., "Teaching Post 9/11 Student-Veterans with Symptoms of PTSD: The Influence of Faculty Perceptions and Self-Efficacy," *Journal Of Vocational Rehabilitation* 25, no. 1 (2011): 29-36, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

⁴ Michael Cochrane, "Veterans Day Gains New Significance on College Campuses," *Worldmag.com*, November 11, 2014, http://www.worldmag.com/2014/11/veterans_day_gains_new_significance_on_college_campuses.

⁵ Cochrane, "Veterans Day Gains New Significance."

receiving GI Bill benefits to offer recent veterans and their dependents in-state tuition.⁶ This is the bill that has helped Jessica fund her schooling, from associate's to bachelor's to master's degree in 2015.

Readjustment can be slightly easier with financial help, but it still does not account for the other difficulties that can be associated with this period. About 44 percent of veterans have reported difficulties readjusting, according to a Pew Research Center survey reported by *The Washington Post*.⁷ These difficulties can include: returning to school, reconnecting with family, readjusting to life at home, health conditions, and finding work.

One of the first major changes veterans experience when returning home, particularly those in the Army National Guard whose units disperse after combat, is the lack of connection to the average civilian. In her 2011 study, Anne Demers from the health science department at San Jose State University interviewed a group of veterans who noted three challenges they faced when returning home: "Lack of respect from civilians, holding themselves to a higher standard than civilians, and not fitting into the civilian world."⁸

Jessica struggled with not fitting into the civilian world when she began college at a later age than many of her peers who are often eighteen years old at the start of college. This made it hard to relate to them. One example is from a class test when a student said she couldn't take it because she wasn't in a good place emotionally with a recent breakup. For Jessica, that was a small emotional problem compared to seeing the dead bodies of fellow comrades.

⁶ Michael Stratford, "New Benefit for Vets," August 1, 2014, *Inside Higher Ed*, August 1, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/08/01/va-reform-bill-congress-provides-student-vets-state-tuition>.

⁷ Brad Plumer, "The Unemployment Rate for Recent Veterans is Incredibly High," *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/11/11/recent-veterans-are-still-experiencing-double-digit-unemployment/>.

⁸ Anne Demers, "When Veterans Return: The Role of Community in Reintegration," *Journal of Loss & Trauma* 16 no. 2 (2011): 160-179, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

Age isn't the only factor for veterans struggling to relate to their peers. As part of their status as nontraditional students, veterans fit a different mold for "student" than many of their counterparts: "they are often older than their student peers, may support families at home, may have significant work commitments outside of school, may be less involved in campus activities and feel less a part of the university community than traditional college students," according to the article, *Understanding the Student Veterans' College Experience: An Exploratory Study*.⁹ However, in this article, veterans cite this different perspective as a strength for them to bring to the classroom.¹⁰ Additionally, the article, *Enhancing Veteran Success in Higher Education*, discusses interacting with younger students gives veterans the opportunity to bring "a wealth of knowledge about living abroad, as well as deep personal experience with innovation, accountability, and responsibility" to the classroom.¹¹ Despite the positivity that veterans can bring to a learning environment, it can still be frustrating when they have to deal with younger students in not only age, but also life experiences.

To counteract the problems faced when dealing with the civilian world like not fitting in, veterans often try to maintain military friendships, which can be difficult because they are not together twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week as they were during deployment. But, according to military experts, it is important to maintain a strong bond with fellow soldiers during this time to benefit each other during the tough readjustment period, according to an article in the *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development* in 2011.¹² Returning from war

⁹ Timothy Olsen, Karen Badger, and Michael D. McCuddy, "Understanding the Student Veterans' College Experience: An Exploratory Study," *U.S. Army Medical Department Journal* (October-December 2014): 101-108, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

¹⁰ Olsen, Badger, McCuddy, "Understanding the Student Veterans' College Experience," 104.

¹¹ Elizabeth O'Herrin, "Enhancing Veteran Success in Higher Education," *Peer Review* 13 no. 1 (Winter 2011): 15-18, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

¹² Ramon Hinojosa and Melanie Sberna Hinojosa, "Using Military Friendships to Optimize Postdeployment Reintegration for Male Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans," *Journal of Rehabilitation & Development*, 48, no. 10 (2011): 1145-1157, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

can be emotionally stressful. One of the reasons for that is veterans lose the intimate relationships they have developed with others who shared the trials and tribulations of combat deployment with them.¹³ Supporting this research, Jessica surrounded herself with fellow Reserve veterans upon returning, and didn't try to connect or form friendships with non-veterans. Additionally, being a National Guard member, meant Jessica was only guaranteed to see fellow soldiers once a month during drill weekends, more if she made an effort to meet outside of that dedicated time, but as researchers Ramon Hinojosa and Melanie Hinojosa point out, that can be difficult with the unit scattered upon returning home and demands on people's attention, such as jobs, school, and families.¹⁴ Patricia Kime, military medical reporter for Gannett Government Media, agrees it's important to maintain those military contacts when returning home, no matter how strong or weak they may be because "there is some thought in just the first few months being able to be with your buddies and talk with others about what you've gone through helps tremendously," she says. "There is sort of a push to get these folks to not be isolated right as soon as they come home."¹⁵

The other side of this idea of spending time with military friends is that it can take away from the family rebuilding that often needs to take place after months apart. In their 2011 article, Ramon Hinojosa and Melanie Hinojosa interviewed twenty Reserve Army National Guard men deployed as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and found out that for weeks or months after returning, some of these men spent time with their military friends multiple nights a week, prolonging contact with family and civilian friends.¹⁶ Jessica was guilty of this when she chose time with her military friends over family, particularly

¹³ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, "Using Military Friendships," 1152.

¹⁴ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, "Using Military Friendships," 1154.

¹⁵ Patricia Kime, phone interview by author, Muncie, Indiana, 6 June 2014.

¹⁶ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, "Using Military Friendships," 1151.

her sisters. She looked forward to drill weekends to have that camaraderie back, just like some of the men in the article.

Yet, this doesn't mean all veterans had trouble letting go of military friendships and re-establishing civilian ones. Ramon Hinojosa and Melanie Hinojosa point out that some of the Reserve veterans interviewed had no trouble with seeing fellow soldiers only on drill weekends.¹⁷ Although a limitation of this study is that the sample is only men, Jessica discussed and showed many of the signs of attachment to her military comrades.

Besides military friendships providing social support for veterans, peer support on campus is important for academic adjustment and progression through higher education, reports scholars from Purdue University and the University of Florida.¹⁸ For those veterans going to college, support from and connecting with peers on campus can be a great benefit not only for academic purposes, but socially as well. Veterans typically gravitate toward other veterans because they can relate to each other because they went through a similar experience. Although Jessica and those in Hinojosa and Hinojosa's survey didn't purposefully seek out only veterans for friends, they all found that many of their new friendships were in fact with other Reserve veterans about the same age and involved in the same conflict(s), whether those friendships were formed through sharing a similar class or participating in a student veteran group.¹⁹ This connection for veterans can be through veterans on campus or periodic unit reunions, which both provide a place to share and connect through the whole of the transition process, however long that might be.²⁰

¹⁷ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, "Using Military Friendships," 1152.

¹⁸ Whiteman et al., "Development and Implications of Peer Emotional Support," 266.

¹⁹ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, "Using Military Friendships," 1152.

²⁰ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, "Using Military Friendships," 1154.

The “transition” period from Reserve soldier to civilian/student can last a few weeks, months, or even years. In a study involving interviews of twenty-five students who served in Iraq or Afghanistan, students noted several areas of concern in regard to their transition to college: veterans administration, campus veterans services offices and other campus support services, re-entering civilian life and becoming a student.²¹ For these students, the difficulty of readjustment is relearning study skills needed to succeed in the classroom. Tied to this relearning are the structural changes that come with transitioning from the military to college. Those twenty-five students in the study said it was difficult to go from the structured military life to a “loosely configured campus where there was no chain of command from which to get answers.”²²

A successful transition to civilian life involves both family and friends as well as veterans who can help each other understand what they are going through. Although upon returning she started off with spending most of her time with fellow Reserve veterans, in time, Jessica branched out to family. Both groups of people are the keys to a successful re-integration into civilian and college life.

Student Veteran Groups Ease Transition

Because of a huge disconnect that can occur on returning to civilian life, in particular starting or finishing college, campus veteran service organizations have been established by veterans for veterans on campuses across the country, intended to support each other during the transition to civilian life. The Student Veterans of America [SVA] organization was founded in

²¹ Robert Ackerman, David DiRamio, and Regina L. Garza Mitchell, “Transitions: Combat Veterans as College Students,” *New Directions for Student Services*, no. 126 (Summer 2009): 5-14, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

²² Ackerman, DiRamio, Mitchell, “Transitions,” 12.

2008 as a grassroots collection of student veterans pushing for passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and has grown to more than one thousand chapters across the country.²³

The organization has three primary purposes: connecting veterans to campus resources, advocating for them, and providing peer-to-peer networks.²⁴ These organizations are often arranged without regard to rank, branch, or time in service.²⁵ Joining a student group like SVA (or in Jessica's case SVO, Student Veteran Organization) can bridge the transition gap and give veterans a supportive environment. Veterans are most interested in connecting with fellow veterans on-campus who share similar experiences and therefore are able to relate.²⁶ Jessica falls under this category as she focused more effort on maintaining and finding relationships with other veterans than with civilian classmates, just as Summerlot, Green, and Parker pointed out in the research.

Still, there are many campuses that don't have the organization. While Jessica was at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, she didn't have SVA to help through the transition period and establish that connection with other veterans. She had deployment friends, but not other veteran friends that had already been through a readjustment and could help Jessica. Once she began online only, she was completely isolated from veterans and non-veterans. It wasn't until she was back in on-campus classes that she joined the Ball State chapter of the Student Veteran Organization, a decision that enabled Jessica to connect with more veterans and feel a connection with those outside of the Reserve Army National Guard unit she deployed with.

²³ John Summerlot, Sean-Michael Green, and Daniel Parker, "Student Veterans Organizations," *New Directions for Student Services*, no. 126 (Summer 2009): 71-79, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

²⁴ Corey Rumann, Marisa Rivera, and Ignacio Hernandez, "Student Veterans and Community Colleges," *New Directions For Community Colleges*, no. 155 (Fall 2011): 51-58, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

²⁵ Summerlot, Green, and Parker, "Student Veterans Organizations," 78.

²⁶ Summerlot, Green, and Parker, "Student Veterans Organizations," 73.

This gave her a friend base at a school where she knew no one and was older than many of her classmates. It also gave her a way to help other veterans going through the readjustment period by spending time together through social gatherings like bowling (the first event Jessica went to with SVO) and also helping each other navigate the civilian life, particularly college. But this still took a few years because the organization isn't on every college campus and online learning does not have interactions with student organizations. An area of exploration in the future as online classes gain more traction is how to make organizations like SVA and SVO a part of the online world.

According to scholars Summerlot, Green, and Parker, there are three different types of campus climates that can affect the way a student veteran organization is treated on campus by non-veterans. They are: supportive, ambivalent, and challenging.²⁷ A supportive climate is typically a university with strong ties to the military that also has an ROTC program, a student veteran organization, and Veterans Affairs office to support veterans.²⁸ An ambivalent campus climate is often at urban or commuter campuses and will make veterans feel less connected to campus. There are only a minimal amount of support services available. The third and final is a challenging campus climate, which are usually at schools that have a history of anti-military movements (like the University of California, Berkeley, which saw major protests during the Vietnam War and has since had anti-military movements), leading students to usually try and hide their veteran identity.²⁹ These different campus climates help to socialize and re-integrate veterans at different levels of success, depending on the institution's climate toward veterans.

²⁷ Summerlot, Green, and Parker, "Student Veteran Organizations," 73.

²⁸ Summerlot, Green, and Parker, "Student Veteran Organizations," 73.

²⁹ Wayne Dash, "Berkeley to Marines: You're 'Not Welcome in Our City,'" *CNN*, February 8, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/02/07/berkeley.protests/>.

Impact of PTSD on Student Veterans

Before PTSD's official diagnosis definition in 1980, it had names such as shell shock, battle fatigue, combat neurosis, and post-Vietnam syndrome.³⁰ The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) defines PTSD as: "Recurring instances of traumatic event(s), persistent avoidance of anything associated with the traumatic event(s), and increased arousal for more than one month after the event(s) which causes significant impairment in one's life."³¹ PTSD is more complicated than a book definition and can be further explained by understanding it on a bodily level; that it "is not an "emotional" or "psychological" problem, but a physiological condition that includes, physical, emotional, psychological, and behavioral reactions."³² For veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army estimates that up to twenty percent or half a million men and women will "suffer the disabling agitation, nightmares, and emotional withdrawal that characterize post traumatic stress."³³

From Vietnam to today, the prevalence of combat-related PTSD has been in a similar percentage range. It is estimated that approximately two to seventeen percent of Vietnam veterans and four to seventeen percent of Iraq War veterans are clinically diagnosed with combat-related PTSD.³⁴

In a population survey of active veterans eighteen to forty years old and above from 2001 to 2005, the rate of PTSD was highest among those who were eighteen to twenty-four years

³⁰ James Geiling, Joseph M. Rosen, and Ryan D. Edwards, "Medical Costs of War in 2035: Long-Term Care Challenges for Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Military Medicine* 177, no. 11 (2012): 1235-1244, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

³¹ Barnard-Brak et al., "Teaching Post 9/11 Student Veterans," 29.

³² Charles W. Hoge, *Once a Warrior—Always a Warrior: Navigating the Transition from Combat to Home—Including Combat Stress, PTSD, and mTBI*, (Connecticut: Globe Pequot Press, 2010), 340.

³³ James Gordon, "A Practical Approach to Military PTSD," *The Atlantic*. December 11, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/12/a-practical-approach-to-military-ptsd/266088/>.

³⁴ Lisa K. Richardson, B. Christopher Frueh, and Ronald Acierno, "Prevalence Estimates of Combat-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Critical Review," *Australian & New Zealand Journal Of Psychiatry* 44, no. 1 (2010): 4-19, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

old and lowest in those who were forty years old and above. PTSD was found to be prevalent in those in the following categories: “Younger, less educated, enlisted, current smokers, and problem drinkers; with no effect found for race or service component (i.e. active duty versus Reserve/National Guard).”³⁵ Jessica fits this mold to a degree with being younger, enlisted, and a drinker upon returning from Iraq.

Besides these categories where PTSD was found to be more prevalent, those with PTSD report being angry more often as well as having higher rates of aggression than those without PTSD.³⁶ Jessica was quiet and reserved before deployment, according to herself and family, but upon returning home, Jessica became outwardly angered at small parts of everyday life such as people cutting her off in traffic. To her, the angry outbursts she was having seemed normal. But others didn’t understand the new Jessica with the angry episodes that were out of character.

PTSD can go beyond impacting veterans in their civilian lives (such as getting angry at other drivers) and become a problem in the classroom. Also classified as an anxiety disorder, PTSD can make returning to school even more challenging.³⁷ Reminders of their trauma while serving overseas can creep into the classroom and impact their learning ability because of the influence the disorder can have on daily life. In one study, veterans reported that loud and sudden noises made them feel extreme anxiety during class because it reminded them of when they were deployed and had to look for roadside bombs or other combat-related danger.³⁸ Jessica has mentioned how sudden sneezing from classmates and movement from students during tests has made her anxious and unable to concentrate, leading to almost failing a class. Veterans with

³⁵ Richardson, Frueh, and Acierno, “Prevalence Estimates,” 7.

³⁶ Barnard-Brak et al., “Teaching Post 9/11 Student Veterans,” 30.

³⁷ Richardson, Frueh, and Acierno, “Prevalence Estimates,” 15.

³⁸ Ellison et al., “Supporting the Education Goals of Post-9/11 Veterans with Self-Reported PTSD Symptoms: A Needs Assessment,” *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 35, no. 3 (2012): 209-217, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

PTSD often report sitting in the back of the classroom, ensuring no one can come up from behind, a fear associated with previous combat experience. Jessica did this upon returning, as well as trying to sit in a seat that she could easily view the door for a quick exit if needed as well as being able to see who came into the classroom.

To help ease into college, veterans have reported they want fewer students in class as well as evening or online classes to reduce the anxiety and stress they can sometimes feel because of their PTSD.³⁹ Jessica is similar as she has felt better in classes with fewer students versus the large lecture halls. She has also taken online classes during college to help with the anxiety that can come with a classroom experience. Not every Reserve or active duty veteran who returns home has PTSD or will ever have it, but for those who do (like Jessica), it helps to understand where the anger at other people and the anxiousness in the classroom comes from in order to better help these veteran students successfully complete college and re-integrate into civilian society.

Mental health issues beyond PTSD have impacted the lives of those returning. Data from the Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health in 2007 suggests that 43 percent of returning veterans report problems with anger, 24 percent report alcohol abuse issues, and 27 percent report “significant” depression, according to researchers Robert Ackerman, David DiRamio, and Regina L. Garza Mitchell.⁴⁰ Jessica is a face to these statistics, with her anger at a Taco Bell cashier, her increased drinking, and anxiety with on-campus classes.

³⁹ Ellison et al., “Supporting the Education Goals of Post-9/11 Veterans,” 212.

⁴⁰ Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell, “Transitions,” 13.

METHODOLOGY

This nonfiction narrative chronicled Jessica Robinson's readjustment story from the day she enlisted in the Indiana Reserve Army National Guard until the day of graduation with a master's degree. The researcher first met Jessica while writing a story for the Ball State University college newspaper about college veterans having trouble connecting with other students. Having that previous connection enabled the researcher to have a starting point to begin discussions about writing a narrative about Jessica's readjustment.

The original idea for this project came in a graduate level journalism class (614), which included shorter versions of the scenes such as Jessica's first night back after deployment and the PTSD march. These scenes and others from the 614 class have been expanded into the final project, but they provided the first necessary stepping stones to delve into Jessica's readjustment period as well as her as a character. The narrative is broken into four chapters, a typical length for a master's creative project. The chapters are based on Jessica's story from enlistment to graduation with a master's degree, arranged chronologically into the chapters in the best way the researcher saw fit to tell the story.

Standard terms in literary journalism/narrative nonfiction that were used in this creative project include: immersion reporting (extended, on-site access to sources), saturation reporting (in-depth secondary research), and narrative writing techniques such as exposition, description (e.g., status and sensory details), characterization and dramatization (including scene reconstruction). All of these aided the author in the creative project objective of telling Jessica's story in a narrative format. Immersion reporting gave the researcher the opportunity to know Jessica, saturation reporting provided education in the literature of readjustment to understand what Jessica had gone through and enable the author to use research to guide discussions, and the

narrative writing techniques helped steer the researcher through Jessica's story by reconstructing scenes and writing more descriptively.

Characters include: Jessica, her parents, her three sisters, and her ex-husband. These people commented on the first few months after Jessica returned and what the readjustment period has been like from their point of view. Reconstructed scenes were developed through eyewitness accounts, supplemented by secondary research, to help profile the life of a veteran transitioning. In his book, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Theodore A. Rees Cheney points out that creative nonfiction writers often have a choice between narrative form and dramatic form, or a combination of the two in their work.⁴¹ Taking his advice, the author used a combination of the two throughout Jessica's story. As Cheney asks, "which scenes have the best visual, imagistic potential? These become your inventory of possible scenes—all else must be handled through narrative summary."⁴² This is what the researcher based the decision on when deciding which parts of Jessica's story deserved a scene and which could be told through summary narrative.

The bulk of the reporting was done through conversational-styled interviews with extended open-ended questions. These conversations took place over approximately thirty meetings with individuals to help and establish the level of trust needed for this type of storytelling. The project featured dramatic scenes based on extended interviews with Jessica and support sources as well as by firsthand observation by the researcher.

Interviews

The preparation for the conversational-styled interviews came from experienced writers like Cheney who pointed out it's important to take prepared questions to explore.⁴³ The

⁴¹ Theodore A. Rees Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Fiction Techniques for Crafting Great Nonfiction* (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2001), 54.

⁴² Cheney *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 55.

⁴³ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 200.

researcher did this every time she met with Jessica. Before ever writing, the researcher had Jessica come up with events in her life from the time of deployment until the present in chronological order to help guide the conversation. The author came up with prepared questions surrounding these particular events. But as Cheney points out, it's important to not stick rigidly with these prepared questions.⁴⁴ Based on the outline Jessica had made, the researcher then divided the story into chapters in a way that would work for the story. This is similar to how researchers Ramon Hinojosa and Melanie Hinojosa conducted their interviews for their article. They divided the interviews up by pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration following deployment.⁴⁵ This semi-structured interview approach as they labeled it was useful for “participants to freely discuss issues that are relevant to their experiences” by having some structure within the interview schedule.⁴⁶

The author entered each conversation with Jessica with an idea of what to cover that day, but that doesn't mean it always went as planned. It's important to be flexible. Sometimes Jessica would be reminded of an event and go straight into that, even if it happened a few years after the scene we had just discussed.

One time that the researcher purposefully went out of order was when it came to discussing the day Jessica lost two members of her National Guard unit. The author wanted to build rapport and trust with Jessica (even though that happened fairly early on in the story), knowing it would be a difficult conversation to have.

⁴⁴ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 211.

⁴⁵ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, “Using Military Friendships,” 1147.

⁴⁶ Hinojosa and Hinojosa, “Using Military Friendships,” 1148.

Tape Recording

Retaining good eye contact with the interviewee is one of the most important attributes of a conversation.⁴⁷ The author recorded all of the conversations and transcribed them verbatim, which took time to do considering each time she met Jessica it was about a two-hour conversation. The author decided to record so she could focus on what Jessica was saying and be better prepared to ask the next question, rather than constantly looking down and taking notes. The researcher would have missed parts of Jessica's character had she been looking down the whole time. It also made it easy to go back and listen to the recordings to ensure accuracy.

To establish the rapport required for a good interview, it's crucial to begin by having (or cultivating) a genuine interest in the person or subject of your interview.⁴⁸ The researcher always began the conversations with asking about how school is or what has been new with Jessica since the two last met, allowing Jessica to relax, start talking, and most importantly, to build a relationship. The author never went into the room and immediately began talking about the topic of the day.

Cheney has a list of "do's" and "don'ts" for interviewing that helped to guide the researcher. For instance, under his "do's," he suggests asking open-ended questions, asking "why," and elicit anecdotes to name a few.⁴⁹ The author asked very few closed-ended questions (e.g. her age at the time of deployment) and instead focused more attention on the open-ended questions (like why did you feel that way or do that), which led to anecdotal stories. One of his "don'ts" was very helpful. He suggests to not fill in conversational gaps.⁵⁰ When silence hits while people are having a conversation, someone usually feels compelled to talk. The researcher

⁴⁷ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 202.

⁴⁸ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 205.

⁴⁹ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 208.

⁵⁰ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 211.

consciously worked hard to not talk in those gaps when Jessica was done talking and before going on to the next question. More often than not, Jessica would add more detail or go into a related anecdotal story, adding to what we had just talked about before the silence. This was very helpful advice when doing this sort of interviewing.

Reconstructed Scenes

Besides narrative and dramatic scenes, there are also observed scenes and reconstructed scenes. Because the author covers an almost ten year time span, she was only present twice (in Jessica's apartment and the PTSD march). Therefore, much of the narrative consists of reconstructed scenes, which is extremely hard to do with not witnessing what happened and relying on other people to be the eyes and ears to these past events. With reconstructed scenes, it's important for readers to know you aren't making anything up, as Adam Hochschild points out in *Telling True Stories*. Readers should be guaranteed that every important detail in a story has a source.⁵¹ This can be a hard part about reconstructing scenes—having reader trust. But because the researcher wasn't there for these scenes, she asked the same question multiple times for accuracy and went back to scenes during later conversations to see if Jessica remembered anything else or if anything had changed, all in an effort to ensure factual information.

In his section on reconstructing scenes, Hochschild points out four elements that are important for this type of writing: accuracy, atmosphere, dialogue, and emotion.⁵² Accuracy, as previously mentioned, is very important. Although narrative nonfiction writing allows for description and characterization as seen in fiction writing, it must still be accurate. Atmosphere is also a hallmark of reconstructed scenes, including details such as sounds, smells, and temperature to fully place a reader into the scene. Dialogue is the third element needed. This

⁵¹ Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, eds., *Telling True Stories*, (Penguin Group, 2007), 135.

⁵² Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 132-133.

occurs throughout the story between Jessica and her family members. However, it is italicized to indicate to the reader it may not be the exact words that were used, but it's as close to what was said as Jessica and her family can remember.

The final element for reconstructed scenes that Hochschild points out is emotion. This delves into how Jessica and her family felt during different scenes in the narrative.⁵³ For Jessica, her anger at simple things and her sadness of missing fellow soldiers upon returning home dominate much of her feelings in the story.

Participant Observation

Writers can look to other fields of study when it comes to the observation of subjects. Anthropologists for example, spend months even years observing people and their culture. They “know the virtues of silence, of sitting in the corner and watching. Yes, there are questions to be asked. But first there are voices to be listened to, interactions to be observed.”⁵⁴ From this article in *Writer's Digest* that I read in a graduate level literary journalism course, I was able to apply what anthropologists do for observation to my own research.

A term used by ethnographers, “participant observation” refers to actually spending time with your subject(s), as described by Isabel Wilkerson in *Telling True Stories*.⁵⁵ Doing mundane things like eating dinner or walking with a subject helps to build trust and understanding better than just asking questions. Wilkerson suggests not doing what a daily journalist typically does—“show up, mine them for information, write down whatever they say in a notebook, and leave fifteen minutes later.”⁵⁶ When the researcher could actually observe a scene unfolding, she spent

⁵³ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 132-133.

⁵⁴ Lauren Kessler, The Search for Meaning, *Writer's Digest*, April 1998, 36.

⁵⁵ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 173.

⁵⁶ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 173.

as much time as possible to observe Jessica, her behaviors, mannerisms, words, and interaction with others to help comprehend a sense of who she is and build Jessica's character.

Similar to Wilkerson whose participant observation included folding socks with her sources, the author participated in a PTSD march with Jessica, family, friends, and community members, giving the author the chance to see Jessica in a different way than when it's just her and the author in a library room having a conversation. Through this experience, the researcher observed Jessica carefully, changing her place throughout the walk, as Anne Hull suggests in *Telling True Stories*.⁵⁷ The author started off near Jessica to observe and listen up closely, then as the march went on, she drifted back to Jessica's sisters and other relatives to see how they interacted with Jessica, what they were saying, and how they interacted with each other to witness the family dynamics. The author also took the chance a handful of times to meet up with Jessica for lunch or dinner and talk about life not related to the project in an effort to observe Jessica when the two weren't discussing her readjustment as well as to build a relationship.

College Student-Soldier: The Impact of Readjustment on an Army Veteran

PROLOGUE

February 2011

The cell phone ringing after midnight jolted Jennifer Robinson awake. Without even looking at the screen, she knew it was her twin sister, Jessica.

"Jessica, what's wrong?" she asked, hearing her sister sobbing.

⁵⁷ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 40.

“It’s my fault,” Jessica said, weeping to her sister. “It was supposed to be me and not them. They shouldn’t be dead. I should.”

Survivor’s guilt enveloped Jessica as she looked at her now empty ring finger, sadness overcoming her.

This was usually how the phone calls went when Jessica was belligerently drunk while at drill weekend in Bloomington, Indiana, the once a month training that is required of those in the Reserve Army National Guard.

“Jessica, give the phone to one of your friends so I can talk to them,” Jennifer calmly said.

She could still hear Jessica sobbing in the background as she gave the phone to a friend.

CHAPTER 1: Fate Steps In

October 2005

Bored while waiting for their next high school class to start after lunch, Jessica Robinson and her twin sister, Jennifer, saw a table outside in the hallway with free army combat uniform colored drawstring knapsacks on it. As they approached, they realized it was a recruitment table for the Army National Guard. Promotional photos of soldiers in action filled the poster board dominating the table. They decided to talk to the recruiter, Donald Hamilton. Their parents had served in the U.S. Air Force, but the young women hadn’t considered joining the military yet.

Jessica knew she wanted to help people in need, like those impacted by natural disasters, but she didn’t know the best way to do that. On that October day in 2005, she had an answer. Jessica was seventeen years old when she decided to enlist in the U.S. Army Reserves.

Once home, the girls talked over dinner with their parents about joining after talking to the recruiter.

After supper while watching television, the two women said they were going to enlist, with the help of signatures from their parents since they weren't eighteen yet.

"I'm going to ask you the same question my dad asked me when I joined, and if you give the right answer, then that's your decision," their father said. *"What is the true meaning of enlisting?"*

Both answered the same.

"I'm willing to die for my country," they responded.

"All right, well then I back you both one hundred percent," he said, satisfied that both understood the risks.

In December, they officially enlisted, with their parents' approval.

On a chilly, snowy day in December 2005, Jessica and Jennifer rode with Army Reserve recruiter Hamilton from Connersville to Indianapolis where they were to begin the enlistment process early the next day. The next morning at about 5:30, the sisters rode a bus from the hotel to the military entrance processing station (MEPS) building. They walked into a large, dimly lit government building to be met by metal detectors. Walking down the tile-floored hallways, the sisters were taken to another part of the building with a waiting area for the different stations, such as vision tests, blood work, physical, and deciding what branch to join. Second thoughts of joining the military stayed out of Jessica's mind, but whether or not to serve in the National

Guard or pursue active duty nagged at her. So she could start training sooner rather than having to wait until after high school, she chose the National Guard.

At about 3 p.m., once the paperwork was signed and accepted, the Robinson sisters swore in. Jessica felt proud to make the most important oath in her life up to that point at seventeen years old. With a group of about twenty people, and standing next to her sister, she said the words that would make her an American soldier:

"I, Jessica, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."

A little less than a year later, she would put that oath into action.

October 21, 2007

Jessica's red Saturn pulled up to Jennifer's boyfriend's house on a late October evening as her cell phone rang. She didn't recognize the number glancing at the screen, but decided to answer anyway. A woman's voice said:

"Hi, it's your platoon leader, Captain Smith. I just wanted to let you know that our drill weekend is the first weekend in November," she started. "It will be a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday weekend and it will be a medical and paperwork checkup because we are going to be deploying. We'll start the deployment process in February."

She wondered how she would tell her family. She had just returned from ten weeks of basic and ten weeks of advanced individual training in Missouri. Now she had to leave again? Normally, a deployment wouldn't occur until a year or two after basic.

Jennifer could tell something was wrong by Jessica's facial expression.

She quietly told Jennifer she was deploying, sooner than they both thought.

"What are you going to tell mom and dad?" Jennifer asked.

Jessica had a drill weekend soon after. It was after this that she told her parents.

Jessica dialed her mother's cell phone number, still in shock.

"Mom, I have something I have to tell you, and you're not going to like it," Jessica said.

"I will be over to the house soon."

Her mother, Edith, had a feeling of what Jessica's news was. Her heart sank.

Jessica sat across from her mother at the kitchen table to tell her what she already assumed.

"I'm going to be deployed," she said, emotionless. She was still in shock at the news so quickly after basic.

"It will be all right, and we will get through it and just do what we got to do," Edith said, trying not to cry and be strong for Jessica.

My baby girl is going to war, she thought.

"I gotta go tell dad," Jessica said quietly.

Edith stood up with tears rimming her eyelids and hugged her grown daughter tight.

From December 2007 to May 2008, Jessica and her National Guard unit, the 38th military police company out of Danville, Indiana, participated in pre-deployment training at various locations, including Stout Field in Indianapolis, Camp Atterbury near Edinburgh, Indiana, and Fort Dix, New Jersey.

On May 5, 2008, eighteen-year-old Jessica deployed for Rustamiyah base in Baghdad, Iraq, where she was stationed from May 2008 to March 2009. She was a military police officer and she spent much of her time driving sand-colored Humvees as part of her commander's personal security detail. Although she lived in a high-stress environment for almost a year, there is one day out of all of them that is seared into her memory.

August 4, 2008

It was about 9:30 in the morning, the hot sun streaming down onto base, soaking into the green military uniforms. Jessica's squad was preparing to leave the base at the same time they do every Monday to patrol the area and transport the company commander to his weekly district advisory council (DAC) meeting. At the meeting, there were people from Iraqi Police, Iraqi Army, National Police, U.S. military, and community leaders. They met in a compound that was about the size of a football field.

Suddenly, she heard and saw a loud explosion just two to three miles beyond the base gates. The squad immediately radioed into base that they had been hit. As soon as they heard who it was, Jessica's squad leader let the squad know they were the quick reaction force (QRF)

to the hit soldiers. Driving out of the forward operating base, the squad leader let the company know they were responding. The four vehicles headed towards the explosion. Jessica drove the lead truck, speeding out the gate and down the dirt road to the hit squad not even five minutes after the explosion occurred. She pulled up at an angle to the right side of the truck that got hit, ensuring she could see the front and back of the truck. Two of the four people in the vehicle got out, with Jessica and the gunner left to keep watch, looking at the bridge ahead for any signs of suspicion or a secondary device. The vehicles are equipped with a device that blocks cell phone usage to protect the soldiers and help stop secondary explosions. She peered out the window at the bridge, eying a man on a cell phone, furiously punching in numbers while looking over the bridge. Nothing happened. He walked away from the edge and after a few minutes, reappeared, again, dialing numbers that were not doing anything.

She radioed the team leader.

“Hey, there’s a guy on the bridge with a cell phone,” she said. “I think he may be trying to set off a secondary device.”

“He’s really too far away to do anything,” the team leader responded. “Don’t engage unless he shoots first.”

Her door was open to communicate better, which made the entire situation that much worse.

The explosion occurred right outside a trash dump, the litter lining the dirt road blown around by the wind. The hot air was filled with the smell of burning trash and flesh. Back in the states, if Jessica smells burning trash or a dead animal carcass, it takes her back to that day reliving the experience over and over.

One of the four vehicles was hit, the explosion melting the armored truck with two dead men inside. Another was seriously injured and flown to Germany for care.

The truck was hit by an EFP (explosively formed penetrator or explosively formed projectile). These are filled with scraps of metal and come out like shotgun shells, fragmenting what is around it. They have been designed to go through armor, which is what happened to the vehicle.

Two more squads came out to help with security detail, and after about forty-five minutes of securing the vehicles, equipment, and what was left of the bodies, Jessica and her squad left to go back to base.

But her time with the incident wasn't over as the hours waned on.

Her squad was in charge of guarding the bodies in the morgue, showing their last respects.

In the basement of an old Iraqi hospital, two people stood right outside the door, their guns at the "low ready," a common position when not under threat. Jessica and another soldier stood outside in the hot sun, guarding the front of the morgue. She stood there for two hours, sweating, while her brain had yet to process what happened.

Guilt at being alive washed over her because someone else died. Anger and sadness rushed through her body in equal magnitude.

They have families that are never going to see them again, she thought.

After the two hours, the four of them went to the company area to meet everyone for chapel, but by the time they got back, everyone was leaving. Jessica's eyes immediately

followed the red, the same red she had seen out at the explosion site. The remaining members of the squad that had been hit were leaving chapel, with blood still on their uniforms, their sad cries piercing the desert air. Not one of them had a dry face.

After going out on missions, she finally got to sleep after thirty-six hours of being awake.

But sleep wouldn't come that night.

She lay in bed, crying into her pillow for hours, trying to muffle the sound. Through the thin walls, crying and cursing from the squad filled the night air, but not sleep.

March 16, 2009

Seven months after the tragic incident, Jessica was sitting in an aisle seat near the front of the plane, unable to see much as the aircraft prepared for its final descent into the Indianapolis International Airport on the southwest side of town. A military official was talking about how exciting it was to be going home, but Jessica's mind was floating down to the ground where her family stood waiting, equally anxious.

Excited to exit the plane but nervous to see her family for the first time in twelve months, twenty-year-old Jessica didn't waste a moment exiting the plane to help unload duffle bags, despite her back pain from picking up too heavy of a gun while in Iraq. The company loaded them onto the bus that would take them down the road off I-70 to Stout Army Air Field, a military installation where families and friends were waiting.

The circular building was an old aircraft hanger that had been converted into a place where units practice drill. On either side of the huge center area with a concrete floor were large fenced in areas. Approximately thirty members of the Indiana Patriot Guard were among the

families and friends, holding United States and Indiana state flags while clad in black leather biker apparel. As a slight cold breeze blew in from the open hanger, the flags waved gently in the wind as the unit entered the building.

Under the sunny, mid-afternoon sky in March 2009, Jessica marched in formation into the building to reunite with her family after a year of service in Iraq. Finding her family among the throng of people, Jessica kept looking back at them as she took in the other sights of the crowd.

The doors shut and the breeze was barred from entering, the flags ceasing to wave. But the Patriot Guard continued to hold them while saluting the unit of about two-hundred men and women as they walked in between the two lines of flags. The smell of gasoline fuel that had permanently seeped into the concrete filled the air.

Breaking formation to reunite with her family, Jessica was engulfed in one hug after another. Her two-year-old niece and five-year-old nephew embraced her in brief hugs while her mother, Edith, twin sister, Jennifer, and younger sister, Alicia, also gave her quick embraces.

The greeting of her father, however, was a different story. After what seemed like a full minute, he slowly loosened his super tight grip around her body, choking back tears as he still embraced his daughter. Tears ran down her mother's face while Jennifer beamed happily to have her sister safely back home. Jennifer had enlisted with Jessica on that December 2005 day, but she later got pregnant. Jennifer's husband was also in the military at the time. She knew she would have to deploy and didn't want to be deployed at the same time as him. If she stayed in, she could've been returning home with Jessica that day.

After leaving the images behind: the crowd with their neon colored signs of “Welcome Home”, the brightly colored balloons, and all those camouflaged uniforms, Jessica headed home with her family to Connersville, Indiana, about a two-hour drive. Jessica’s mother drove Jennifer and Jessica’s niece and nephew to their father’s house. Jessica rode with her father and younger sister. Jessica’s parents divorced when she was in fourth grade. They get along and help each other out, still maintaining a relationship for the sake of family. Her older sister, Nicole, was not there because of work.

“Do you want to drive?” her father asked while standing by the car door of the black Trailblazer.

“No,” Jessica replied abruptly, almost harshly.

Why would you even ask that? she thought to herself, buckling her seatbelt.

Situating herself in the front seat with her younger sister in the back seat, Jessica orientated herself to the familiar smell of cigarette smoke and the faint smell of soiled socks from Alicia’s soccer games.

“Dad, slow down.”

She tightly gripped the car seat with both hands on either side of her legs as her father sped up on the seventy mile per hour road. She hadn’t traveled more than thirty miles per hour in any vehicle that whole year as part of the Army’s policy. Going slower made it easier to spot improvised explosive devices hidden in the poorly constructed roads of Iraq.

Pretending to be asleep so she didn't have to talk, the car was silent en route to her father's house. After exiting onto a state road where the speed limit dropped to fifty-five, Jessica released a sigh of relief and thought to herself, "*Oh, thank God.*"

Around dinnertime, the Trailblazer pulled up to the two-story suburban house where Jessica's father and grandmother lived. Jessica took in the sights of suburbia, her father's street at the top of the hill with neighbors on either side, a far sight from the dust and desert of her Middle Eastern deployment.

Cigarette smoke curled into her nostrils from her grandma's old habit as Jessica walked in the front door, its smell drifting through the whole house. Jessica's clothes would smell like tobacco smoke by morning. *I'm okay with that*, she thought. *At least I'm home.*

She went to her room around 11 p.m., her mind still wired from finally being home. Unable to sleep because of the seven hour time difference and change in surroundings, she settled into the bunk bed she has had since she was a little girl, reclining to watch TV shows until about 2 a.m. While overseas, she slept on a newer mattress, but back in her father's house, the eight-year-old mattress was worn and old, making falling asleep much harder.

A green patio swing, white plastic chairs, a wooden dinette set, grill, rosebush and flowers adorned the wooden deck outside the Connorsville, Indiana home, the deck adjacent to Jessica's bedroom.

About 4 a.m., Jessica sat upright in her bunk, startled by a noise coming from the deck. Her heart started beating faster. It sounded as if someone was scooting furniture across the deck. Peeking outside the window while carefully ensuring the curtain barely moved, Jessica couldn't see anything in the pitch black of night.

If I had my gun on me and went out there, I would have shot somebody, she later said, reflecting on her mindset at the time. She felt vulnerable and naked without her gun, similar to how the average person would feel without his or her cell phone.

Quickly devising an alternate plan, she reached for her iPhone and quickly hurried to the bathroom. She wanted to make sure whoever was outside couldn't see the cell phone light through her bedroom curtains. The bathroom had a single night light that cast enough of a glow. She also moved from her bedroom to make sure the intruders weren't trying to break into her grandma's room, which had a door that connected to the bathroom and another door that connected to the deck.

She dialed her father, Steven, using the touch screen, despite him being in the same house.

"Dad, dad, there's somebody outside," she whispered into the phone.

"What?" he answered groggily from being abruptly awakened at 4 a.m.

"Dad, there's somebody on the porch."

"What?"

"You need to go out there and check."

She hung up the phone, her heart still pounding in her chest.

Her little sister's two dogs began barking, piercing the quiet of the night. The Doberman and pitbull were in the fenced-in backyard.

After rubbing his eyes for a few minutes, Jessica's father went outside into the early hours of that March morning to investigate. The automatic porch light was already on, indicating movement around the deck area. The dogs stopped barking upon seeing her father, the neighborhood a peaceful quiet again.

The table and chairs had been moved but nothing was stolen. Recently teenagers had been reported sneaking around the neighborhood stealing yard furniture. Her father came back inside upset over the incident, not seeing anything or anyone, but noting the chairs had been moved on the deck.

Jessica couldn't fall back asleep after that—her brain was on full alert, her blue eyes wide open and aware. She and her father sat at the kitchen table talking into the early hours of the morning.

As the morning wore on, he began to nod off. Seeing her father about to fall over from exhaustion, Jessica gently told him she was going to bed and shuffled back to her room.

She still couldn't sleep.

Again, she searched online for television shows, anything to calm her nerves. As the sun peaked through her curtains from the east, she finally dozed off in her childish bunk bed after a nightmarish first evening home. It was the first of many sleepless nights to come as Jessica's readjustment period began in mid-2009.

Mid-March 2009

Before she deployed to Iraq, Jessica was not easily angered. But Jessica's personality changes became more evident in the readjustment period after military service as her possibility

of having PTSD became more obvious (she would be diagnosed by a VA psychiatrist in early May) and her anger intensified. During deployment, anger kept Jessica alive and alert. At home, Jessica's anger hurt her family the most.

That March at Taco Bell, just a few days after returning home, Jessica experienced her first intense anger outburst, just one of hundreds yet to come.

Jessica and her sisters, Jennifer and Alicia, stared at the brightly colored Taco Bell menu, debating between tacos, burritos, nachos, and combo meals.

"I'd like the supreme nachos but with just meat and cheese," Jessica told the server. Her sisters also chose their lunch items and stepped aside to wait for their orders.

Jessica looked around the Taco Bell in Connersville, mentally noting there were four tables of people, not yet full for lunch time. And there were two exits.

When the tray of food was set in front of the sisters, Jessica stared at her nachos. There were beans and sour cream on them. She rushed back up to the register.

"Excuse me, I had the supreme nachos with just meat and cheese," she told the lady.

She waited again for her order and again, the nachos weren't done properly.

"What the fuck, are you stupid?" Jessica screamed at the cashier. *"I literally just want meat and cheese!"*

Her sisters stared at her, baffled at Jessica's anger.

"Why are you yelling at them?" Jennifer asked softly. *"It's not that big of a deal."*

Before Jessica could make more of a scene in the Taco Bell, her younger sister, Alicia, stepped in.

“Okay, we’re going to go out to the car and wait for you,” she told Jennifer. Jessica got the hint.

Not wanting to stay in the restaurant, Jennifer stepped up to the counter.

“We’ll take it to go, please,” she said quietly and calmly.

Jessica followed Alicia out to the car, still angry at her order being wrong.

“Stupid fucking people can’t get anything right,” Jessica muttered en route to the car.
“What’s wrong with people?”

Jennifer approached the red Ford Focus, distributed out the food, and the three ate in silence, not knowing what to say to their sister who had just yelled and cursed at the Taco Bell cashier, seriously overreacting in their eyes. This wasn’t the Jessica they knew, and her behavior in that Taco Bell confirmed their concerns.

For Jessica, the anger wasn’t a problem to her at that point. It seemed normal to be angry and yell. It wasn’t until her official diagnosis with PTSD that she realized her anger was a growing, persistent problem.

Late March 2009

After returning from deployment, Jessica knew she wanted to have her own place in Indianapolis to go to Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis and be closer to the armory where her National Guard unit is based. She and her mother drove around looking for

“for rent” signs, stopping to tour a few and figuring out prices. She found one she liked and that was affordable. It was on the west side of Indianapolis, and only ten minutes away from school. She immediately signed the lease.

Located on the third floor, the living room greets guests with an “old” box TV, love seat, lamps, and end tables Jessica got from family friends. A balcony with a sliding glass door is right off the living room, overlooking a pond below. The dining room had a four-person table with the ugliest chairs Jessica had ever seen. They were the old, rolling-type dining room chairs. With a blue, almost green fabric that felt like a burlap sack. But nothing else matched, so did it really matter? They were comfortable and easy to sit in. The dining room also served as an office space with a desk and computer. The two bedrooms were down the hall; one with a walk-in closet and the other with a rolling-door closet. Jessica took the former. The other room was nearly empty except for an air mattress. Her apartment looked like she just moved in even after she was there for some time because of the lack of photos and home décor on the walls.

In between returning home and going to school, Jessica had no set schedule, a stark change from her time abroad. She usually woke up in the morning, ate breakfast, watched TV, maybe work out, ate lunch, watched more TV, and maybe read a book. After not watching television for almost a year, Jessica was making up for lost airtime.

She continued to do so — even when she had company.

Both Alicia and Jennifer had spring break at the same time at the end of March 2009 and decided to spend that time with Jessica since she had just returned home from deployment. However, that week Alicia and Jennifer got a glimpse into how their sister had changed.

Sitting on the couch in silence watching TV filled much of their time together. Small talk was interspersed, but not the type of talking the sisters would have done before Jessica left. It felt like acquaintance talk, glaringly signaling to Alicia and Jennifer that Jessica was not the same sister as when she left. Even though her sisters came to see her, she often left to hang out with friends from deployment, leaving Alicia and Jennifer without the sister they came to visit, alone in Jessica's apartment.

April 2009

Fidgeting in the lobby, Jessica was already uncomfortable with the idea of talking to a stranger as the minutes passed with her waiting in the VA Hospital in Indianapolis for her first post-deployment visit. A friend she deployed with encouraged her to seek help for her bouts of anger and depression. After weeks of deliberation, she found herself as a patient seeking help.

Once she saw the psychiatrist's room, her discomfort amplified. There was enough space for a desk and two chairs in the windowless room. The doctor's small desk was neatly organized, but still crowded with papers, intensifying Jessica's claustrophobic feelings. Every space that could be used for something was used, seemingly cramming Jessica into the tiny space.

"So, Jessica, tell me what's going on?" the psychiatrist started out as Jessica tried to relax with the smiling stranger sitting across from her.

I've been in bathroom stalls with more room, Jessica thought to herself, the cramped quarters making her feel like the psychiatrist was almost on her lap.

"Well, one of my friends I deployed with encouraged me to come in and seek help for some of the problems I've been having," Jessica replied.

“What are some of those problems?” the woman asked.

Jessica noticed how quickly she went straight into it, not building a rapport with Jessica that she so desperately wanted, but instead remaining distant and to-the-point throughout her approximately thirty minute appointment. There was no small talk or welcoming statements. *This is just as uncomfortable as seeing my gynecologist*, Jessica thought to herself. There weren't introductions with that type of an appointment either.

“I’ve been having a lot of nightmares so I haven’t been sleeping well,” Jessica said. She paused, not willing to add more detail unless probed.

The psychiatrist asked for more details.

“The nightmares vary, but they’re usually about being shot at, being in the middle of a bomb blast, or about the two guys that died in my unit and I was part of the team that was first on scene so I saw the hit truck and all the blood,” Jessica said. *“They are some of the most real dreams I’ve ever felt. I usually wake up feeling whatever emotion I’m feeling in the dream and can’t go back to sleep.”*

“How often do you have these dreams?” the doctor asked.

“At least five nights a week, so almost every night,” Jessica replied. *“It’s hard to fall asleep, and the nightmares make it really hard to stay asleep.”*

“Switching gears, let’s talk about alcohol,” the lady said. *“We’re going to do a little verbal screening. In one night, how many drinks do you have? A drink is either a shot, a whole drink, or a beer.”*

Jessica admitted she had become a binge drinker since she returned home, going out with her fellow Reserve soldiers regularly on drill weekends or other nights of the week they wanted to hang out.

“Probably four or five,” Jessica answered, not knowing the number was higher than the recommended amount. *“But not every night, mostly just on drill weekends.”*

“You need to be careful, Jessica, and think of the effects of binge drinking on your mind and body,” the psychiatrist warned.

Talking about other health-related aspects such as her appetite, happiness and sadness levels, and her appointment history, the psychiatrist prescribed Jessica three different medicines based on the initial appointment: anti-depressant, sleep medicine, and anxiety medicine. However, she didn’t discuss the side effects, what to watch out for, or how long Jessica should continue to take them.

The PTSD diagnosis would come next month.

The psychiatrist sent Jessica away with the prescriptions to fill them within the walls of the VA Hospital, resulting in another hour wait.

Jessica agreed to be put on the medication they prescribed, but after taking the meds for nightmares and getting dizzy from it, she put the pills back into her medicine cabinet, untouched.

With each ensuing appointment, Jessica was prescribed more and more medicine. She joked that it looked like she was running a pharmacy out of her apartment. There were meds for nightmares, an anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, sleeping pills, Ibuprofen, muscle relaxers and

ointment for backaches. There was medicine to prevent ulcers. There was medicine to circumvent nausea. The doctors prescribed medicine so she could take other medicine.

Her family was a small part of her life at this point, unaware of the growing number of prescribed meds Jessica was taking until twin sister, Jennifer, asked for an Ibuprofen.

“Try something in there,” Jessica replied, pointing to the medicine cabinet.

“What is all this?” Jennifer asked as she opened the medicine cabinet door and saw the medicine overflow.

“I don’t know,” Jessica said, not really caring what she thought. *“I don’t really want to talk about it.”*

Not only was the amount of medicine containers growing, so was her anger. Now, if someone cut her off in traffic, she would scream and curse them out. She would freak out if some fast-food server didn’t give her ketchup for French fries or chicken nuggets, ruining her whole day.

Early May 2009

After talking to the same friend who had encouraged Jessica to go to the VA in April, she again took her advice and went to the VA to discuss the Taco Bell incident and the several other instances of overreacting. She thought maybe she had PTSD, but she didn’t want to be labeled. She didn’t want to be another statistic. And most of all, Jessica did not want her military career to end because she had been diagnosed with PTSD.

About a month since her first VA visit, Jessica sat in the same VA hospital lobby. While waiting, she filled out a questionnaire that was developed based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV). It listed criteria for hundreds of psychological conditions, including PTSD.

Once called, she followed a nurse back to one of the rooms where a psychiatrist gave her a verbal, symptom-oriented questionnaire, based on her questionnaire responses: Do you get angry a lot? Do you frustrate easily? Do you have trouble sleeping? Do you have nightmares?

The psychiatrist left the room to evaluate Jessica's responses. After several minutes, she returned.

"Jessica, we think you have or at least are showing the symptoms of PTSD," the psychiatrist said. "We would like to offer you counseling as well as medicine to help you cope with it."

Great, more medicine, Jessica thought, listening to the doctor give her a PTSD diagnosis.

May 9-15, 2009

Before Jessica deployed, she was quiet and reserved. If something upset her, she would hold it in and wait to be alone to cry about it. Now, she would tell people what she thought, a personality change that took time to get used to. Nicole, her older sister, has always been louder and one to speak her mind, according to herself and her sisters. But now having two people who both spoke up caused tension that reached a climax on a family trip to Florida.

Jessica's dad wanted to watch a shuttle launch, and Jessica thought this would be a great chance to go to Florida with him and her sisters. Along with Nicole's husband, they all crowded into an SUV and drove south.

During the week, Nicole and her husband didn't always participate in family functions, going for a walk on the beach instead of playing in the ocean with everyone else.

After butting heads all week, Nicole and Jessica finally had enough. The day they were supposed to drive back to Indiana, Jessica was aggravated that Nicole wasn't helping with packing and instead was outside smoking with her husband. She started throwing Nicole's items out over the balcony, the anger and annoyance building from the last week.

Nicole had gotten her dad glass-collector cups, and when Jessica threw those over and one broke, Nicole had enough.

"I can't believe you broke that cup!" Nicole shouted at Jessica. *"You bitch!"*

Jessica turned around and retaliated.

"You're a bad mom because you left your son with his dad," she responded coldly.

Her son's father was a drug addict but wasn't allowed to be alone with his son so the boy was at his grandma's. Nicole heard this insult to her motherhood and snapped.

"You bitch!" Nicole screamed at her. *"I'm gonna kill you!"*

Nicole ran full speed toward Jessica, ready to take her down. Jessica backed up from her approaching sister, tripping over the curb in the process. Just when Nicole was about to swing on Jessica, their dad jumped in and broke it up.

"I'm not spending the next sixteen hours in a car with you!" Jessica shouted at her sister. *"Fuck this."*

Jennifer and Alicia quickly tried to calm Jessica down.

Soon after, she booked a flight home and took a taxi to the airport. Her family drove the SUV that was in Jessica's name back to Indiana.

The event made it clear to her family that this wasn't the same Jessica who had left for Iraq.

Early July 2009

Jessica had her first Fourth of July fireworks experience that summer following her deployment. This was one of the first times after Florida that she reacted physically, unlike the emotionally charged Taco Bell incident.

A couple weeks before the Fourth of July, Jessica and Jennifer were in their apartment living room (they moved in together in May) watching TV together while Jessica did homework. Suddenly and unexpectedly, fireworks went off with a loud "boom," startling Jessica right off the floor. She quickly resorted to her Army training and immediately started to find cover in the living room. She slid across the carpeted floor, her eyes fixated on the target- the light blue two-seater couch where she wanted to take cover.

Jennifer's nervous laughter made Jessica pause.

"What are you doing?" Jennifer asked.

Jessica had made it halfway to her target-- the couch.

"I don't know," Jessica responded, laughing and retreating back to the floor on the other side of the room.

"Did you think it was an explosion?" Jennifer asked.

"I just wasn't expecting fireworks so I think it just startled me," Jessica said, still trying to process what had happened.

I should be adjusted by now, she thought. She was frustrated being back home for four months, but still not being “fine”.

She remained on edge for the next few days until July 4th, waiting for the next explosion to startle her, involuntarily transporting her back to Iraq.

At twenty, Jessica started classes in July 2009 at IUPUI, majoring in forensic science. She didn't realize how hard adjusting to college would be. Before combat, Jessica was always the kind of high school student who sat in the front row. After deployment and a PTSD diagnosis, that changed.

For example, trying to find a parking spot on the commuter campus made her anxious, angry, and worried that she would be late to her first class. In the first week of classes, Jessica was relieved to see there would only be about fifteen students in her math class. Jessica positioned herself toward the rear of the room where she could see the door.

Her other classes, however, were a different story. The four-hundred person lecture hall for Chem 101 was more crowded than she wanted. She felt panic growing as she made her way to the front of the room, as many of the students had already claimed the seats in the back.

To this day, she still has no idea what was said in that first lecture. Her heart was pounding and she kept looking around the room, especially when someone would head to the door.

She made sure to sit in the back of the lecture hall after that.

Test days were always the hardest in a class that size. One day, hunched over her test, Jessica wrote in the short answer blank space what felt like the right answer. Across the room,

someone suddenly sneezed, jolting Jessica in her seat and streaking a dark, un-erasable pen line across the test. Her heart raced for a few moments, then her focus drifted back to the test. A few minutes later, someone else got up and finished with his test, forcing Jessica to shift her eyes away from her work. For the remainder of the test, Jessica was a nervous wreck, constantly looking around because she had to know what was going on. She almost failed her exam as a result of her anxiety.

She remained at IUPUI until December and then transferred to Kaplan University, an online school, while living with her sister, Jennifer, and her family in Indianapolis.

CHAPTER 2: Readjustment for College Veterans

When asked what was harder, deployment or readjustment, Jessica didn't even hesitate: readjustment.

As part of post-deployment, Jessica remembers a briefing that essentially said don't beat your wife or drink too much. The discussion on PTSD was missing, but at the time, she didn't think very much of it. The 'what will it be like to be a civilian again' talk was absent. And the adjustment to college life with younger peers definitely wasn't part of the briefing.

She was about to lose what she had known for the last year and return to a life that had moved on without her.

For some student-veterans, the readjustment period from military to civilian life can be difficult, requiring ongoing support services from both veterans' and higher education organizations. Jessica is among a population of returning veterans dealing with an extended readjustment period and subsequent college enrollment. She is representative of the growing

problem of veterans returning home and the troubles that follow that readjustment, particularly in regard to college.

Classes for Returning Veterans

Veterans who returned from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam didn't have the academic options of today's veterans. Today, student veterans can take online classes, on-campus classes, or both. For student-veterans seeking a smooth transition from deployment to the classroom, on-campus classes can facilitate integration back into the civilian population. At a few colleges and universities, most notably the University of Arizona, West Virginia University, and the University of California, Berkeley, for-credit classes are being designed for those with military experience, according to the ASHE Higher Education report in 2011.⁵⁸ They offer veterans an opportunity to write about their wartime experiences and discuss the readjustment process. West Virginia University offers veterans-only classes in public speaking, English, and history.⁵⁹

Besides academic courses, other measures can be taken on campus to make it easier for veterans, such as "classes with fewer students, isolated settings for test taking, and evening or online classes to reduce anxiety," said scholars from Iowa State University in their 2009 study.⁶⁰ Because of her anxiety associated with being in a classroom setting, Jessica transferred to online classes early in her college education to help reduce anxiety, as the scholars discussed.

Although on-campus courses have been cited as enhancing student-veteran readjustment, online instruction is also becoming popular with this target population. This idea of distance education has been explored more recently because of the larger number of students enrolling online. In this web-based learning environment, it is important for students to feel as though they

⁵⁸ "Ideas for a Self-Authorship Curriculum with for Students with Military Experience," *Veterans in Higher Education* (2011): 81-91, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

⁵⁹ "Ideas for a self-authorship," 84.

⁶⁰ Rumann and Hamrick, "Supporting Student Veterans in Transition," 212.

are part of a social, virtual community and to have a sense of human contact within their online world.⁶¹ This is one of the bigger challenges of online learning, which is still having that sense of involvement and contact with others that occurs in a classroom setting. Depending on how the class is set up, contact between the student, other students, and instructor may be limited.

If online classes are going to be part of a veteran's education, it is best if they are combined with on-campus classes. Studies have already shown a combination of online and on-campus components to help students succeed. This includes online seminars and face-to-face discussions as well as traveling to different places to learn about the course content as a class.⁶² Online learning is flexible and that component can be taken advantage of when it comes to a combination of online and in-class learning.

Although online classes are becoming more common, on-campus learning is still the best route for veterans who want to reintegrate into college with ease. Online education has gained in popularity in recent years, but it is not necessarily a positive for those who have been deployed. It is the face-to-face contact through on-campus classes and student organizations that are most beneficial to veterans when transitioning from a deployed Reserve soldier to a college student.

Examples of Colleges Focused on the Readjustment Period

Colleges across the country are starting to develop programs that focus on the readjustment period for veterans. A few examples of schools that have dedicated space for veterans include: Pat Tillman Veteran Center at Arizona State University, the Veteran Resource Center at Auburn University and the Veteran Services and Military Assistance Center (VSMAC)

⁶¹ Insung Jung, "Building a Theoretical Framework of Web-Based Instruction in the Context of Distance Education," *British Journal Of Educational Technology* 32, no. 5 (2001): 525-534, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

⁶² Gina Douthit, "Command and Staff College Distance Education Program," *The DISAM Journal* (2008): 9-13, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, according to an article in *Forbes*.⁶³ Additionally, Western Michigan University, University of Kentucky, Penn State Mont Alto, and Purdue University all have a veteran's center on campus. (This is not an exhaustive list of universities with centers, but gives an idea to a few of them). Yet, there are still many colleges across the country that don't have dedicated centers, such as the schools Jessica has attended (IUPUI, Kaplan University, Ivy Tech, and Ball State University).

An in-depth, successful example of a case study of a university that saw a problem for veteran education and found a solution is Western Michigan University. The staff, who worked with nontraditional students like veterans, grew concerned with the issues impacting the education of incoming veterans to the campus. These issues include: readmission after mid-semester deployments, military transcripts and the lack of it transferring to college credits, and medical issues such as PTSD and TBI, according to an article in *New Directions for Higher Education* in 2011.⁶⁴ The administration requested an analysis and recommendations to better help this group of students. (This was beneficial because between fall 2005 and spring 2010, the article reported that WMU saw a 43 percent increase in the number of veterans on campus, with the first big wave of Iraq veterans returning to civilian life in 2007).⁶⁵

This focus and attention on the veteran population gave the university a "military friendly" distinction in 2009. Military friendly as pointed out in the article about WMU is the "intentional efforts made by campuses to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of

⁶³ Doug Bradley, "Soldiers are Marching Back to School," *Forbes*, September 11, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2014/09/11/soldiers-are-marching-back-to-school/>.

⁶⁴ Tracey L. Moon and Geraldine A. Schma, "A Proactive Approach to Serving Military and Veteran Students," *New Directions For Higher Education*, Vol. 153 (Spring 2011): 53-60, Academic Search Premier, EbscoHost.

⁶⁵ Moon and Schma, "A Proactive Approach," 53.

veterans and create a smooth transition from military to college life.”⁶⁶ (Ball State has also earned a military friendly distinction from 2010-2015, according to the Ball State website). The analyzed information and consequent solution became The Office of Veteran and Military Affairs at the Michigan school. One of the main aspects of the WMU military focused success that sets it apart from other schools is the “System of Care.” This is comprised of the faculty and administrators from several disciplines of campus that are part of a military oversight committee. This committee collaborates with The Office of Military Affairs to address issues military students face, the article’s researchers Moon and Schma learned.⁶⁷

The other part of the success comes from the concept of “everybody plays.” The researchers say this refers to the “buy-in from faculty and staff to embrace and actively participate in the military friendly paradigm.”⁶⁸ This includes: educational seminars, presentations by the student veterans, and opportunities for staff, faculty, and community members to show interest or offer their expertise in a way that benefits the veterans. Additionally, the article points out that one of the main aspects that help WMU be an important example in a transition program for veterans is the Military and Veteran Student Association group on campus, which also happens to be one of the first student organizations to affiliate itself with the national Student Veterans of America group.⁶⁹

As one of the forefront military friendly institutions, WMU has established a program that has seen growth and expansion, but will, like any good program, continue to improve itself and be an example to universities across the nation. The researchers point out the ways it can continue to provide guidance to other institutions of higher education, which include: transition

⁶⁶ Moon and Schma, “A Proactive Approach,” 54.

⁶⁷ Moon and Schma, “A Proactive Approach,” 54.

⁶⁸ Moon and Schma, “A Proactive Approach,” 55.

⁶⁹ Moon and Schma, “A Proactive Approach,” 55.

courses, implementing military students' suggestions, providing university-wide training to serve veterans, and a mentoring program between veterans and faculty/staff that can help bridge the gap between the academia world and the soldier world during readjustment.⁷⁰

Western Michigan University is one major example, but there are other schools that are trying to make life easier for the veteran population as well. The Veterans Resource Center at the University of Kentucky has a full-time student veteran liaison as well as a student veteran organization. The liaison provides assistance with areas such as applications for veterans' benefits and advocate for veterans' support programs. An article published in the U.S. Army Medical Department Journal in 2014 found that this center goes beyond these areas to even help with referrals to campus and VA mental health resources, an area many student veterans say is needed.⁷¹ For Jessica's master's degree at Ball State, she had access to a full-time, veteran's benefits certifying official in the Office of Veterans Affairs on campus.

Other schools have received funding for building centers specifically for veterans. The Penn State Mont Alto Center was built from a \$10,000 VetCenter Initiative Grant from the SVA and The Home Depot Foundation to refurbish a campus building for the Veterans Center, according to an article on the *heraldmailmedia.com*.⁷² The center gives "veterans a place to call home, help each other with classes, share stories, study and connect while transitioning from military life." Last year, the veteran enrollment increased by eleven percent to almost four thousand GI Bill-users on the Mont Alto campus.⁷³

⁷⁰ Moon and Schma, "A Proactive Approach," 58.

⁷¹ Olsen, Badger, and McCuddy, "Understanding the Student Veterans' College Experience," 107.

⁷² Miller, "Penn State Mont Alto Opens Center for Student Veterans," *Heraldmailmedia.com*, September 2014, http://www.heraldmailmedia.com/news/tri_state/pennsylvania/penn-state-mont-alto-opens-center-for-student-veterans/article_c8a159e7-967a-52b4-aba6-9d716986f880.html.

⁷³ Miller, 2014.

Similar to Penn State Mont Alto, Purdue University's Veteran Success Center was helped in funding by The Home Depot Foundation, who awarded \$10,000 of Home Depot gift cards to the Purdue Student Veteran's Organization, reports the *Purdue Exponent*.⁷⁴ The center, located in the Purdue Memorial Union, was able to have new amenities with the money, including: "study spaces, a widescreen TV and a listening table designed by Klipsch Audio Technologies, allowing students to listen to their own music while they study." These changes help to better assist veterans with the readjustment period and give them a place where they can share commonalities.

In addition to actual centers, other universities have programs that aim to address the readjustment period in a college setting. At Western Kentucky University, The Veterans Upward Bound program had ninety-nine participants in the 2008-2009 school year and jumped to 165 in the 2012-2013 year. The program is aimed at "helping veterans hone their skills through education to prepare them for careers," reports an article on *armytimes.com*.⁷⁵ The article goes on to say that in addition to WKU, about fifty other schools nationwide belong to the Veterans Upward Bound program, developed by the Education Department.

Now and the Future

For some student-veterans, the readjustment period from military to civilian life can be difficult, requiring ongoing support services from both veterans' and higher education organizations. SVO and the Veterans Affairs office at Ball State helped Jessica with her

⁷⁴ Kelsey Sullivan, "New Success Center Dedicated for Student Veterans," *The Purdue Exponent*, September 12, 2014, http://www.purdueexponent.org/campus/article_8e6d0a11-b116-5b09-8341-4ed5fecdf438.html; Internet; accessed 27 April 2015.

⁷⁵ Associated Press, "Upward Bound Continues to Prepare Vets for College," *Armytimes.com*, August 26, 2014, <http://archive.armytimes.com/article/20140826/EDU04/308260064/Upward-Bound-continues-prepare-vets-college>.

collegiate transition. SVO helped her with socializing and the VA office assisted her with understanding and using her benefits to the fullest degree.

Looking at what is being done now to foster a closer relationship between higher education and veterans can assist both with their future relationship. Based on survey results from 690 institutions across the country from the 2012 American Council on Education, the report shows the current status of programs and services for veterans and service members in transition.⁷⁶ In one part of the survey, only thirty-seven percent of postsecondary institutions with services for military students and veterans reported providing transition assistance from the military to college life.⁷⁷ This is one area where colleges are clearly under par and could work harder to aid in the transition process from soldier to student.

Further results show that out of those institutions surveyed, eighty-nine percent have actively increased emphasis on military students since 9/11, partly due to the Post-9/11 GI Bill and partly due to actively trying to attract veterans to campus and establishing new programs and services.⁷⁸ All of these reasons have benefitted Jessica in her college education experiences. Additionally, eighty-seven percent reported providing assistance with VA education benefits counseling for veterans.⁷⁹ Jessica received this counseling through the Veterans Affairs office on campus in an effort to ensure she made the most out of her GI Bill benefits following deployment. Although the survey does not cover every institution of higher education in the country, the overall trend clearly shown in the data is an awareness of this growing population and a conscious effort on the part of institutions to come up with long-term plans to assist veterans with their education.

⁷⁶ Lesley McBain, Young M. Kim, Bryan J. Cook, and Kathy M. Snead, "From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members," *American Council on Education* (July 2012): 1-70.

⁷⁷ McBain et al., "From Soldier to Student II," 47.

⁷⁸ McBain et al., "From Soldier to Student II," 47.

⁷⁹ McBain et al., "From Soldier to Student II," 47.

The future of readjustment as it relates to college students means a continued cohesion between colleges, the faculty there and veterans to ensure they are able to make as smooth of a transition as possible to the college world. Students like Jessica who take on-campus classes spend time with faculty who may or may not be well-educated on the needs of transitioning veterans. Less than half (47 percent) of institutions in the 2012 survey reported providing training opportunities for faculty and staff.⁸⁰ Although in another part of the survey a slightly higher amount of institutions reported (54 percent) it was a priority to make faculty and staff more sensitive to the issues faced by veteran students, that is still only about half of those surveyed.⁸¹

Overall, awareness for the increasing veteran population at colleges across the country will help aid in the readjustment period for this population, taking the skills and knowledge learned at the collegiate level and transferring them to the civilian workplace.

CHAPTER 3: Rock Bottom

Jessica stood across from him, looking into his eyes as the judge asked if she took him as her husband. She had doubts, but she said yes anyway. (April 19, 2010).

January 2010

Returning from Iraq with two married sisters, a younger sister in a serious relationship, and friends on the path to happily ever after, Jessica struggled with the social aspect of readjustment, specifically romantic relationships.

⁸⁰ McBain et al., "From Soldier to Student II," 47-48.

⁸¹ McBain et al., "From Soldier to Student II," 48.

Not having luck with meeting people, Jessica turned to match.com to help her find someone to date after the loneliness set in. It was difficult to go from constantly being surrounded by her fellow Reserve soldiers to being alone.

After three months on the Internet dating site and a few unsuccessful dates, she met Eric,^{*82} a thirty-two-year-old computer programmer. She was twenty-one.

They met in January and immediately began spending a lot of time together at his place. For Jessica, it was like having the camaraderie again that she craved.

But Jennifer and her husband weren't so sure.

The two invited Jessica and Eric over for dinner so they could meet him. Eric cooked Italian food for the four.

Sitting down to eat, Jennifer noticed Eric's phones.

"Why do you have two phones?" she asked as she took a bite of the pasta, immediately regretting it, as she disliked the flavor.

"Yeah, only dicks have two phones," her husband, Shannon, chimed in.

"One is for work and that one is my personal phone," Eric replied, pointing at one.

"Who takes their work phone with them on their personal time?" Jennifer retorted back and put her fork down, empty.

The four ate in silence, Jennifer and Shannon already disliking Jessica's new boyfriend.

⁸² Name has been changed.

Then in March, Eric brought up the idea of marriage, just a few months into dating.

Jessica spent much of her time at Eric's apartment. She was cooking dinner and watching TV when he came home from work.

He was smiling at her as she stirred the pot on the stove, making Jessica wonder what he was going to say.

"We should get married," he said, looking at Jessica for a reaction.

The question came out of nowhere. She stood and stared back before gathering her voice, the happiness and excitement of engagement missing from her emotions either from a lack of emotion or knowing she shouldn't be with him.

"Aren't you going to get down on one knee and propose?" she asked.

"No, I don't think I need to," he replied.

Say no, she thought. I don't want to be alone though. This readjustment is hard enough; being alone is just another burden to that.

"Okay," she responded, letting him attempt to put the gold solitaire ring on her finger, which was too small and would need resized.

She finished making dinner, concluding an uneventful engagement day.

Jessica, her sister, and her sister's husband were moving into a new place, and Eric was moving at the same time, so he ended up moving in with the three of them. Their engagement was a secret that they shared.

April 19, 2010

Deciding to mix up the usual breakfast routine, Jessica and Eric went to Hardee's down the road.

"How's work?" Jessica asked as she took a bite of her breakfast.

"Not too bad, been busy with a bunch of projects," he responded.

Glancing down to see her new ring on her finger, she steered the conversation in a different direction.

"Where should we live once we're married?" she asked, taking another bite and looking up at him.

"Let's get married today," he said.

Jessica was stunned at his statement. Silence filled the space between them.

No, don't do this, she thought. *This isn't what you want.*

Jessica kept eating in disbelief at what he just suggested. Her mind raced, searching for the words to say, the words she really wanted to say, but she couldn't do it.

She said yes.

Driving from Greenwood to the downtown courthouse in Indianapolis, Jessica quickly realized Eric was actually serious.

Jessica peered up at the tall, limestone building shooting up towards the sky as they approached the entrance.

The majority of their time was taken up by the paperwork needed, such as a marriage license. Once all that was finished, they entered the judge's chamber, and reality set in. *Oh my gosh, this is really happening*, she thought.

Jessica stood across from Eric, both dressed in jeans and T-shirts, hardly wedding attire even for a courthouse marriage. The judge began. His secretary was in the room to be the witness.

After a short mention of marriage, the judge asked the questions that would make them a legal couple.

"Jessica, do you take Eric to be your husband?" he asked. *"If so, say, 'I do.'"*

What are you doing? she thought. *You can still get out of this.*

Whatever amount of camaraderie her and Eric shared, she felt it was the way to help her readjust to civilian life. Marriage is part of that, or at least she thought.

"I do," she quietly responded after thinking about it one more time.

The judge turned toward Eric.

"Do you take Jessica to be your wife?" he questioned. *"If so, say, 'I do.'"*

"I do," Eric said, more quickly than Jessica.

They didn't have rings to exchange with it being a spur-of-the-moment decision earlier in the day.

“By the power vested in me by the state of Indiana, I now declare you husband and wife,” the judge said, smiling. *“You can kiss the bride.”*

He hammered his gavel as if he just pronounced a sentencing.

That’s weird, Jessica thought in the moment.

The two leaned in, exchanging a short kiss, and Jessica was married.

After, they went to Kay Jewelers to find Jessica a wedding band and Eric his ring before stopping for dinner.

At the time, Jessica was still trying to finish college and face her upcoming annual training event. Kaplan wouldn’t allow her to register for Summer 2010 classes because she didn’t know if she would have Internet access where she was going for military training. She made the decision to leave Kaplan in May 2010 after one semester and attend Ivy Tech online in Indianapolis.

Once married, Jessica spent her time taking online classes, keeping the house clean, playing with Eric’s three-year-old daughter from a previous relationship, and training the two puppies they had.

April 2010

Coming home from work, Jennifer was stunned to see Jessica and Eric’s marriage certificate sitting on a shelf in the living room. Jennifer quickly found her sister.

“What is that?” she asked, referring to the framed piece of paper that was so much more than that.

"We got married," Jessica responded, emotionless.

"You did what?" Jennifer asked again in disbelief.

"Yeah, we got married," she repeated.

There was silence between the twin sisters.

"Okay," Jennifer replied, not knowing what else to say. It was already done.

They didn't go out for dinner or have a reception to celebrate their marriage. The rest of the family was told when Jessica and Eric drove to Connersville for a weekend. This lack of communication and sudden, unannounced marriage told the family exactly where they were in Jessica's life — out of it.

A couple months into their marriage, Jessica and Eric were sitting together watching TV, a usual activity for the two. Jessica still wasn't back to a normal relationship with her family, only texting them occasionally and not making an effort to see them.

"I think I should probably go to counseling for PTSD," she started, based on her anger episodes and trouble with relationships.

"No you don't," he responded flatly. *"It's not real."*

"Well I haven't been the same since I got back," she said.

"Well if you have PTSD from war, then I have PTSD from my friend dying in a motorcycle crash," Eric said.

“No, those are two totally different things,” she said back, angry at his lack of support.

“It’s no big deal,” he said. “I did JROTC in high school, so I know what it’s like.”

They sat in silence, Jessica feeling defeated. Not having the support of her husband, she didn’t bring it up again and chose not to receive further help for her PTSD diagnosis from 2009.

This was just one more argument that was fueling the divide between them.

October 2010

Only six months into their marriage, Jessica bought her own apartment as the two were having marriage troubles. On a late October day in 2010, she woke up with a headache and needed Ibuprofen, which was still at their shared house. Needing the medicine and other items of hers was a good reason to go over there to talk to her husband.

She pulled up in front of the house and saw Marmaduke’s*⁸³ car there, the blue hatchback. *He must have let her stay the night*, Jessica thought, immediately infuriated.

Marmaduke knew Eric through the group of motorcycle people he rode with.

Jessica put her key in the door, turned the knob and opened it slightly, Eric suddenly on the other side trying to shut it with Jessica in the door frame.

“I need to get my stuff!” she shouted.

He then tried to pick her up and shove her outside the door, Jessica pushing back.

“No, I’m getting my shit!” she yelled. *“Let go of me! I want my shit.”*

⁸³ Name has been changed.

Jessica finally got into the house.

The other girl came out of the bedroom in her pajama pants.

"Bitch," Jessica said at her.

"You should leave," Eric told the girl.

She did as he said, without saying a word.

"I'm done," Jessica said, and went straight to the kitchen to grab the bleach with the intent to go to what was their bedroom and pour it all over the bed. Angering Eric, he trapped her in the kitchen and called the police.

Jessica didn't waste a second. She immediately started throwing the full wine bottles meant for her husband and his girlfriend onto the linoleum floor, glass shattering. She did the same to Patron bottles and the dirty dishes in the sink, which were probably from the night before with the other girl.

"My crazy wife showed up and is threatening my life and breaking my stuff," he told 911.

They could still see each other as he made the call while she smashed anything she could in the kitchen.

Jessica laughed.

"Once they see us, they are going to laugh at you," she said. *"Look at you and look at me. How can you be fearful of your wife? Good luck saying I touched you."*

"I'm going to tell them you punched me," Eric said.

“Good luck proving I did,” she said back.

The police arrived about ten minutes later. Eric was watching for them and quickly opened the door when they knocked.

The two overweight males entered the house, telling the couple to calm down and separated them immediately.

One of the officers questioned Jessica about what happened. All she wanted was her stuff.

“If you're going to press charges against her, we will press charges against you,” one of the officers told Eric.

The difference between their sizes was unconvincing to the officers that she was threatening his life and there were a lack of weapons to back Eric up.

“She can take what she needs, and the rest will be handled in court,” one of them said.

Jessica searched for the largest bag she could find. One of the officers followed her from room to room as she grabbed her military uniforms, clothes, toothbrush, toothpaste, and other miscellaneous items. The officer left Jessica alone in the computer room to talk to his partner, leaving her to take advantage of an opportunity.

There was a can of Pepsi next to Eric's computer on his desk. As Eric's livelihood came from computers, she knew what to do. Jessica dumped what was left on the keyboard and the tower as payback.

Jessica then heard the officer coming back towards the room.

"Oh, there's nothing in here I need," she said and walked out, without the slightest bit of remorse, and shut the door behind her.

She left with a bag stuffed with what she could fit and returned to her apartment to cry.

January 2011

Trying to forget about the broken marriage and coming divorce, Jessica focused on criminal justice courses at Ivy Tech and finding a job in November 2010. She went to a temporary agency and took a typing test. Soon after, LE Myers, an electric company in Greenwood, Indiana, hired her as a receptionist. A few months later in January, Jessica was living by herself in her apartment while the divorce paperwork was being processed. Her depression had hit its all-time low. No one really knew how she felt.

She questioned her life and whether she wanted to keep on living it.

One night in late January, Jessica eyed her hydrocodone in the bathroom cabinet and popped a couple for pain.

I could take all of these, she thought to herself. The fact she had the thought terrified her.

She grabbed a Wal-Mart bag and began tossing all the medicine bottles, empty or not, into it. She flushed the hydrocodone down the toilet, eying the pills swirling in a circle until they disappeared.

I know I don't want to die, she thought, as tears burst out, sliding down her cheeks. She wondered how she got to this point, unable to recognize herself. Jessica was afraid for the next time she would be that sad.

She decided there couldn't be a next time, and she had to talk to someone. She knew the person who could come the closest would be her mother, who had struggled with depression. She gathered herself and still sobbing, called her.

"Jessica, are you okay?" her mom asked when she answered after seeing her daughter's number on the cell phone screen.

"I feel like I don't want to live anymore," she said. *I don't want to kill myself,* she thought. *But I feel like no one would care if I weren't living.*

"Don't do anything," her mother said. *"I'm coming to you."*

"Could you help me?" Jessica asked her mom in between sobs. *"I know you've been in that position with depression and went and got help."*

"Going to the hospital helped me with some things, but I'm not going to guarantee it will help you, but I think it will help you in the way you think about things," her mom said.

"I think I need help," Jessica said.

"I will be at your place tonight," her mother said.

Her mother and her girlfriend, Debra, drove to Jennifer's to pick her up and they spent the night with Jessica. The next day, they went to the VA hospital for help.

On the fifth floor, a social worker came out to greet Jessica and took her back to her dimly lit office.

"So tell me what's going on, Jessica," she started.

“I feel like my world is falling apart,” Jessica started. “I can’t keep a marriage together; I don’t have a job; I don’t have friends; I can’t do anything right. I feel like a failure.”

“Do you have a plan?” the social worker questioned.

“Not anymore since I got scared and flushed my meds down the toilet,” Jessica said.
“But I don’t know if I could stop myself from doing something else like drive off the road.”

“If I let you go home today, could you honestly tell me you won’t hurt yourself?” the social worker asked.

“No,” Jessica responded.

She ended up spending three days in the psych ward of the VA, watching soap operas, reading books, and talking to doctors. They wouldn’t let anyone up to visit her who she didn’t approve of, especially Eric who found out she was there, although the hospital wouldn’t confirm it.

The wait was hard for Edith, especially not being able to see Jessica while she was there.

My baby is having bad thoughts and who out there can help her? she thought, as she sat in the waiting area.

Jessica didn’t want her dad at the hospital, which was hard for him. Those nights, he slept very little with his phone by his pillow, waiting for a call about his daughter.

After a long three days, Jessica was released from the hospital.

“That place really didn’t help me,” Jessica told her mother when she got out. *“In a way it did and in a way it didn’t.”*

Having experienced a similar hospital stay, Edith told Jessica what she couldn't tell her before.

"I know, I couldn't just tell you that out front," she told her daughter. "It makes you not want to be there, so it makes you do the things you need to do to not have to be there anymore."

Right away, Jessica moved in with Jennifer's family, taking one of the rooms in the five-bedroom house. This move was the first step in rebuilding a closer relationship with family, which she had struggled with since returning from deployment.

In early February, Jessica was sick in the hospital, and Jessica's boss called Eric because he was listed as an emergency contact. He told the boss she was faking it, which then got her fired from her job.

But he went even further. After looking up the information for her National Guard unit's phone number online, Eric called her military supervisor.

"Jessica is suicidal and planning to kill herself and I don't know if she would hurt other people," he told the supply sergeant in her company who answered the phone. "Also, I don't think she should have a gun."

Because of the accusations, Jessica's company commander was quickly informed and called Jessica.

"Are you okay?" she asked Jessica. "Your husband called us."

She went on and told Jessica what he had said. Furious, Jessica set the record straight.

“Yes, I was in the hospital, and yes, I’m depressed, but no, I don’t want to kill myself and no, I don’t want to kill other people,” she responded.

The situation was flagged in Jessica’s record, but fortunately for her, the company continued to let her train as normal.

Soon after, Jessica’s contract was up. In order to stay in, she had to say she didn’t have PTSD and agree to not receive treatment. Or she had to confess to having it, and hope she wouldn’t be kicked out of the service. Jessica never wanted to lie about it, so she had to obtain the necessary documentation from the VA to stay in.

February 2011

Binge drinking had become a part of Jessica’s life on drill weekends, helping her relax, but always ending in anger or sadness. Tonight was no exception. Well into a couple mixed drinks of Crown and coke, one of the women she was out with who had just transferred to the company Jessica had just left, sat in the booth with Jessica and started talking about the dedication ceremony for one of the men whose body Jessica saw bloodied and mangled in a Humvee in Iraq. Extreme sadness flooded over her as Jessica’s reaction was to continue taking shots and drinking vodka and Red Bull in a Bloomington bar, down the road from the armory. The images of that day rushed into her mind and that’s all she could think about for the remainder of the night, continuously throwing back drinks to help with the pain, drinking more than she normally would have.

She looked around the drab, empty bar at her fellow Reserve soldiers, willing herself not to cry. She couldn’t stop herself however. Tears flowed as she took another sip of her drink.

Jessica didn't want anyone to see her crying at the bar so she hurried to the bathroom around midnight. She quickly went into one of the small, wooden stalls and locked the door behind her, sitting on the toilet seat. Looking around, she noticed the plain white walls with chipped paint.

Jessica grabbed her black Palm Treo cell phone, calling the one person she usually did when she was in one of her drunken states.

The cell phone ringing after midnight jolted Jennifer Robinson awake. Without even looking at the screen, she knew it was her twin sister, Jessica.

"Jessica, what's wrong?" she asked, hearing her sister sobbing.

"It's my fault," she said, weeping to her sister. *"It was supposed to be me and not them. They shouldn't be dead. I should."*

Survivor's guilt enveloped Jessica as she looked at her now empty ring finger, sadness overcoming her.

Her family didn't know the extent of her guilt. Jessica wasn't lying when she said she was supposed to die that fateful day in Iraq.

Another American Humvee had gone through the checkpoint in Iraq when hers would have been in line that day, on its way to the same meeting every week. Her squad was running late and another squad went through the checkpoint at the time Jessica's would have normally. She later found out the Iraqi police were targeting her and her team because they were the commander's security detail. Looking back, Jessica thinks another reason her squad was targeted was because they likely thought that killing a female would receive more attention than a male. Because of this twist of fate of the unintentional squad getting hit, Jessica often feels the guilt even more when she has been drinking.

All Jennifer could hear now was excessive sobbing and no words.

“Jessica, why are you so sad?” she tried again. “What’s going on?”

It was impossible to hear anything through the drunken sobs, leaving Jennifer sitting on the other end, just listening to the sounds of her twin sister in utter despair and sadness.

This was the binge drinking Jessica who regularly got drunk on drill weekends and called Jennifer crying. She always felt a mix of guilt and sadness. The guilt was for coming home alive and the sadness was for those who didn’t make it.

“Jessica, give the phone to one of your friends so I can talk to them,” Jennifer calmly said.

She could still hear Jessica’s sobs in the background as Jessica did what her sister told her to.

Jennifer better not tell them to take me back to the hospital, she thought to herself. *I don’t want to go back.*

Jessica emerged from the bathroom, but couldn’t stop the tears from flowing down her makeup-smeared face. Her friends drove her back to the hotel, as Jessica continued to weep.

On the way, Jessica was paranoid the guy from her unit and his wife were taking her back to the hospital, but they soon pulled into the hotel parking lot and she knew she was safe.

Jessica was too drunk and barely able to walk. Her friend helped her back to the hotel room. He made sure she brushed her teeth, took Ibuprofen, and he put a trash can and water next to her before literally tucking her in.

This is usually how these nights ended with Jessica in drunken tears.

CHAPTER 4: Phoenix Rising

Helping other people has helped heal me. - Jessica

January 2012

Living with her sister, Jennifer, in Parker City, Indiana, Jessica began commuting to Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana for classes in January 2012. She was ready to start her bachelor's degree after receiving her associate's degree in criminal justice from Ivy Tech. This was the first time since IUPUI that she was taking on-campus classes again. A few years into her readjustment, she felt ready to be in class with students again. The undergraduate work was harder compared to her associate's degree because she couldn't easily look up information in a book or on her computer in an in-person classroom like she could in online classes.

At twenty-three, Jessica started her bachelor's degree on a cold, rainy January day. She was on her way to a 7:30 a.m. statistics class and crossed at the scramble light intersection at McKinley Avenue and Riverside Avenue. Heading toward the Riverside entrance doors, a car drove by, soaking her entire right side with water from the collecting puddles.

She quickly went inside and found the nearest bathroom, trying to figure out how to dry off. *This is a bad omen*, she thought to herself. *I need to go home*. She decided against it, though, and walked into her first Ball State class, dripping wet. Learning her lesson from her first day on-campus at IUPUI a few years earlier, she picked a spot where she would feel comfortable, deciding on sitting in the middle of the classroom. There weren't too many students behind her as it was a class with a maximum of twenty students. She did, however, have an unobstructed view of the door.

Her feet were wet and soggy along with her pants. Jessica sat in the classroom and soon started to shiver from sitting in her damp clothes from the cold, January rain. She kept her coat on for that whole first class.

As part of the first day routine, the students had to introduce themselves to their classmates. Jessica said her age and that she was a National Guard veteran. This baffled some students who couldn't believe she was twenty-three much less a combat veteran, as many of them were only eighteen and had just recently left home for the first time.

Her clothes slowly dried as she got through her first and only class that day.

This first day of school was much different than her IUPUI one, as she was more adjusted to civilian life at this point. Jessica knew she couldn't sit in the very front, for instance, but with time, she was able to step foot in an on-campus class again.

Instead of trying to stay to herself like she did at IUPUI, she actively tried to be more involved in the Ball State campus life.

Jessica got an email invitation about orientation for student veterans soon after starting in that spring semester. Reading the email from the Student Veteran Organization, she saw there would be pizza. *That's good enough reason for me*, she thought to herself.

Finding the room in the North Quad building on campus was a struggle as it's set up like two buildings combined, but the floors don't quite line up. Finding rooms is like a maze that dead-ends in the spot you think your classroom should be. She finally found the room on the second floor that had about twelve people sitting in desk chairs throughout the small classroom.

“We have meetings, hold events, and try to bring veterans into the group and get you engaged on campus,” the president said. “This is what our program is and how we can help you.”

The president went on to talk about the next event, which was going to be bowling. Jessica was eager to be involved, even though she knew it would take a lot of effort on her part to be social. She attended that event with other veterans, relating to them a lot easier than other students in her classes.

Jessica was a member from January until May when they needed positions filled. She became the Salute national honor society recruiter, which involved recruiting veterans for the veteran only national honors society. After a year in that position, she ran for vice-president of SVO, wanting to go out and talk to veterans, trying to recruit new members and help them any way she could. She didn't want them to spend years alone trying to find themselves or where they should be the way she struggled with it. Jessica wanted to be an inspiration to other veterans, and SVO was the outlet to do that through.

June 10, 2012

When Jessica's military contract was coming to an end, she knew wanted to continue, so she requested an extension for military service. She needed paperwork from her doctors showing that she was able to serve. Jessica was waiting for a diagnosis from the Veterans Affairs office about her back, but each doctor told her something different. She had to obtain 'fit for duty' paperwork based on a diagnosis she didn't have and was having great difficulties attaining access to enough care to establish one. Jessica gathered as much paperwork as she could to show her commanders that she was fit to stay, wanting to make a part-time career out of it.

At this point, Jessica was working with a recruiter a few days each month going out to schools and other places in the community to talk to people about the National Guard instead of going to drill.

However, the twisted pain in her back was really beginning to impact her future as a National Guard soldier. To stay in the military, she needed to pass a physical fitness test. She was able to do the required pushups and sit-ups, but she couldn't run the two miles in the required time because of her back. While in Iraq, she had tried to pick up a fifty-caliber gun by herself, which weighs about eighty-four pounds when unloaded. Feeling the weight, her back strained in response to the added load, pulling muscles to adjust for it. That and the wear and tear of wearing all the equipment on her body wore her discs down on her lower spine, forcing Jessica's back to try and compensate for not using those muscles normally, forcing the muscles to pull tighter.

After enlisting on that cold, snowy December day a few years before, Jessica had dreamed of staying in the service for at least twenty years to be eligible for a pension. That goal was cut short when lower back problems that had continued since Iraq kept her from performing her duties.

June 10, 2012, is etched in her memory. A Sunday that is among the worst military experiences she ever had while serving, along with the day she lost her fellow soldiers. Working at Ball Memorial Hospital as a receptionist, she received a phone call.

"Why aren't you here?" her squad leader barked into the phone, referring to the once a month drill weekend for the National Guard.

"Nobody told me to be there," she responded.

“Well, you’re supposed to be here,” she said.

“No, I’m on different orders so I’m not doing that right now,” Jessica responded.

“You need to get down here,” the squad leader demanded. “You have to turn in all your gear.”

Her heart sank. She knew what that meant. She was in the process of getting her unit commanders the paperwork required, such as all the doctor’s notes saying she had been to the VA. But it wasn’t enough. Her soldier identity was stripped from her after six years of service because of her physical ailment. Exiting the Bloomington National Guard Armory in the early afternoon, she walked to the car where her twin sister was waiting for her. Jessica’s tears streamed down her face. She was a civilian. *A civilian*. She no longer had a uniform. She no longer had a rank. She was no longer a warrior for the United States Army National Guard.

Because she was working and going to school, completely withdrawing wasn’t an option. Living with Jennifer helped her as well. Her family was there for her, even though she had hardly been there for them since she got back.

She called her dad to tell him the news. Being a veteran and still knowing people in the service, he had a feeling it was going to happen to her. The military was basically giving anybody with medical issues an honorable discharge as part of realignment.

“I got an honorable discharge over my medical stuff,” she told him over the phone. She wasn’t crying, but was more upset than anything. “I was thinking about making it a part-time career and retiring from it.”

As time went on, however, Jessica found out it was a good thing, as she could devote all her time to school, pushing her to earn an even higher degree.

August 2013

In May 2013, Jessica graduated with her bachelor's in criminal justice. In August, she re-enrolled as a graduate student studying clinical mental health counseling. During her time overseas, her friends shared their frustrations about the military with her, but it wasn't until after she was home and had been promoted into a new unit that people came to her for advice and to vent. Additionally, in her final semester of undergrad, she picked up a minor to fill her schedule in order to receive full GI bill benefits. She took a counseling psychology class and quickly knew she wanted to attend graduate school to help veterans.

It was at this point in 2013 that she finally felt like she was about to begin what she wanted to do with her life — help others.

Helping others began by first helping herself move into her own place at Ball State, a place where she could be alone, something she still craves to have to this day as part of her introverted personality.

On the exterior of Jessica's apartment, red and brown brick covers the first floor while off-white vinyl siding hugs the second. An AC unit pokes out from under the first floor window.

One of her many candle warmers wafts a sweet scent through Jessica's apartment. Although the layout of each two-bedroom apartment is the same, the inside can be unique to the tenant, depending on the decorations and personality that is added to the already furnished apartment. Entering through the front swinging door and opening the main door, the linoleum

stairs loom ahead leading to the two bedrooms and bathroom upstairs while the living room is to the left.

With her white thin drapes unable to keep light out very well, the last bits of sunlight dance across her living room floor, casting shadows around the room. An old Lazy Boy sofa with a matching chair dominates the living room, the outdated brown, tan, and dark green colors and plaid pattern of the furniture matches the dated brown wood-paneled walls. The other cinderblock walls are painted off-white in comparison. A deep sea blue blanket with white and red square patches is draped across the back of the chair with the quote, “if tears could build a stairway and memories a lane, I'd walk right up to heaven and bring you home again.” A quilt Jessica made out of multiple shades of pink and purple with plaid and flower patches looks like a spring flowerbed across the brown couch. Over one hundred movies fill two wooden stands with her favorites, *The Vow* and *P.S. I Love You*, among the romantic and comedy titles. The living room doubles as an exercise space; a large, blue fitness ball and grey yoga mat are tucked into the corner when not in use.

The compact kitchen connects to the living room with a brown wooden table and two chairs on the left side and the sink, brown cabinets and an off-white refrigerator on the right. Aside from the large sauté pan soaking in the soapy sink water from last night's meal, all the other dishes are neatly stacked and put away in the cabinets. As an avid cook, Jessica's most prized kitchen possession is a KitchenAid mixer.

Wooden, light-brown Scrabble magnets from Dave & Buster's that are made to look like actual scrabble tiles cling tightly to the fridge in fear of falling, arranged in unrecognizable words, courtesy of her three-year-old niece and six-year-old nephew. Photos of her with her

niece and nephew adorn the fridge as well. A four inch by four inch yellow dry erase board with pink and yellow flowers embroidering the outside is attached to the front of the fridge, used for grocery lists and other important notes. After her niece and nephew leave, Jessica always has a new drawing on her dry erase board to smile at and new “words” to decipher. A ceramic fat mustachioed French chef in a white uniform with a white chef’s hat and two loaves of bread clenched in his right hand serve as a stove spoon holder, while another chef in the same style is used for the paper towel holder.

The linoleum stairs leading to the second floor of her apartment creak under anyone’s footsteps like a high-pitched squeak. Her two bedrooms each serve a unique purpose. The smaller bedroom is used as an office. On a large brown wooden desk sits a PC desktop computer and boxes to organize and store school papers and supplies. Sitting patiently on her desk waiting to be put back together after it came apart is a scrapbook with the Army logo adorning the outside of the gift that her aunt and uncle got her when she finished Advanced Individual Training. Photos of her military service in Iraq are taped on multiple pages.

Books on criminal justice and clinical psychology line the tall wooden bookshelf like soldiers during formation. Other “for fun” books are crammed in between the school texts like sardines. Some are on loan to friends. Her diploma from Ball State sits on top.

A few steps across the hall is a larger bedroom, the one Jessica sleeps in. A flowered white comforter and lavender queen-sized sheets adorn the unmade bed. Jessica’s closet is well organized with colorful hot pink long sleeves, blue T-shirts, and grey and orange sweaters hanging on one side and foldable turquoise, hot pink, and black containers with pants neatly folded on the other. A few dirty clothes litter the floor waiting to be tossed into the laundry.

Having her own apartment might make forming friendships more difficult Jessica said, but she is still trying. It has taken her about three years to really feel comfortable being around people again, even people she knew before her deployment. It has taken even longer to establish friendships with those outside of the military.

September 2013

Early in the semester, Jessica had a test in her research methods class and got a D on it. She went home and cried. But instead of keeping it to herself as she had done in the earlier stages of her readjustment, she called Jennifer.

“I feel like a failure. I got a D on a test,” Jessica said into her cell phone. *“I’m not going to be able to do grad school, and I’m going to have to find something else.”*

“Don’t give up — it’s one test,” Jennifer said. *“You’ve come too far to just give up.”*

Her sister’s words helped her to continue, even pulling out an A in the class. Earlier in her readjustment period, she would have just stopped going to class instead of letting someone know she was struggling. At the start of her master’s, she realized she really was moving forward in her readjustment. Through completing her coursework and involvement in SVO, Jessica knew she was on the path to helping veterans. Knowing what she wanted to do, she directed her passion over the next six months to organizing a PTSD march for veterans.

April 12, 2014

Jessica was rushing about the little pavilion out by the Ball State football field, trying to greet each person who walked up through the recently wet lawn. Mud and grass stuck to people’s

shoes as they checked in with her for the PTSD march. Jessica wrote each name down in a spiral notebook, including the amount of money he or she donated to the cause. White shirts with PTSD awareness across the front lined a picnic table in sizes from small to extra large.

Pulled in multiple directions as more people arrived to the event, Jessica became even busier with final preparations. This included calling the person providing the food and university police who were providing security during a crosswalk and to communicate if something is going on for the route. In addition, her mind worried about someone watching the children as their high squeaked screams could be heard from the far end of the pavilion.

Once everyone arrived for the march about twenty minutes later, it was time for Jessica to speak, something that has taken her time to feel comfortable doing since returning from deployment.

"I can't talk loud so you'll have to gather closer," she said, motioning for people to congregate around the picnic area. After thanking the marchers for coming out and supporting the cause, she explained the route.

To the lyrics of 'Fortunate Son' by Creedence Clearwater Revival, the white T-shirt clad marchers stepped back onto the wet grass, ready to walk down McKinley Avenue to raise awareness for PTSD around 11 a.m.

Many still had a light jacket on to keep warm against the chilly morning. Luckily the sun was out, helping to make the walk more bearable.

Jessica was leading the route with her niece clutching her left hand, her father walking on the other side of Jessica as her other siblings fell in step right behind.

The walkers marched down Bethel Avenue toward McKinley, where the walk would hit the halfway point at Riverside Avenue and they would turn around to walk back to the pavilion by the football stadium. Veterans walked beside non-veterans, conversing about a variety of topics.

It warmed up through the march with many people shedding his or her jacket along the way. After arriving back at the pavilion, hot dogs and hamburgers greeted the hungry walkers, many people taking one of each.

After a windy lunch with napkins blowing off tables, it was Jessica's turn to speak again.

"I just wanted to thank everyone for coming out today and supporting this event," she said, standing in the sunny portion of the pavilion. *"Now it's your turn to talk about what you've gone through as a veteran or whatever else you want to talk about."*

Not waiting until Jessica sat down, her twin sister stood up to speak.

Thankful for her sunglasses that shielded Jessica's eyes, tears swelled up as Jennifer talked about what it was like to be without her twin and how Jessica had changed when she came home.

Her younger sister, Alicia, decided to speak next, taking to the center stage, an opening between the picnic tables.

As soon as she began speaking, emotions overwhelmed her.

"I was a freshman in high school when my sister was deployed," she began, clearly holding back tears.

Suddenly, she collapsed crying onto the concrete floor, her older sisters immediately rushing over to comfort her as Alicia sat with her face in her hands. Her father and mother also got up from the picnic tables, encircling their daughters. It was silent in the pavilion except for the hushed sobs of Alicia as she tried to compose herself. Jessica was the last to join the family circle, paralyzed by emotion. Alicia isn't publicly emotional, Jessica would say later. But neither is the rest of her family. Seeing any of them cry in front of people is something they don't normally do.

Regaining her composure, Alicia stood up again, trying to speak for a second time about an emotional time in her young life.

"She went my sister," she barely croaked out, tears overwhelming her again. *"And came back my biggest hero."* She immediately sat down on the picnic table bench, ready to be out of the center of attention.

On the other hand, Jessica's older sister, Nicole, was ready to be in the spotlight. She often says what's on her mind and doesn't care what other people think about her, Jessica said. As she began to talk about how Jessica's deployment impacted her, Jessica learned about issues her sister went through that she never knew about.

"I would get drunk and call my dad late at night because I was feeling bad since I was the older sister and she was gone and I couldn't protect her," Nicole said. She didn't cry, just spoke matter-of-factly about the impact Jessica's deployment had on her.

Each family member had a different experience to share about the returned and changed Jessica.

Thankful for the support from her family that day, Jessica knows that without them and the support they have given her during the readjustment period, she wouldn't be where she is today.

Other people spoke who came to the event, veterans, non-veterans and representatives from the Ball State Counseling Center.

After people were done pouring out their emotions, everyone got up and stood together so Jessica and a friend who deployed with her, Kay, could read a poem that Jessica had written. The focus was on losing the two fellow National Guard soldiers in Iraq and the anger and guilt feelings that followed.

Worried it would be too much and not make the point she wanted it to make, Jessica breathed in and read the first line of the poem, alternating with Kay. The poem rang true to the "walking wounded" theme of the 5k.

I'm walking wounded and you wouldn't even know.

I'm walking wounded and I try not to let it show.

I'm walking wounded and sometimes it's hard to let anyone see.

I'm walking wounded and I want to pretend the pain is make believe.

I'm walking wounded and I tuck the pain away.

I'm walking wounded and I pray to see you someday.

I'm walking wounded and I wish it were me.

Hidden behind her sunglasses, Jessica's eyes swelled up with tears.

I'm walking wounded and I just want people to know the sacrifice of being free.

I'm walking wounded and I want to cry.

I'm walking wounded and I just can't bring myself to say my last goodbye.

I'm walking wounded and I carry you by my side.

I'm walking wounded and I know because of you I'm still alive.

I'm walking wounded and I thank you every day.

The group applauded the two veterans who clearly had just relived an emotional time in their lives. Silence encased the group for a moment until a child let out a whine. People retreated back to the picnic tables to hear more.

Being open with fellow veterans as well as non-veterans, Jessica announced that after she completes her master's and Ph.D., she wants to open up a full treatment facility to help veterans with needs that aren't being met by Veterans Affairs and others. Organizing the PTSD march is one step toward her future of working with those who need help and is a drive of her motivation, she said.

A few years ago, Jessica wouldn't have talked in front of people like she did on that April day, her father commented while at the march. But with time, she's gotten more used to it, not worrying so much about making sure she always says the right thing. Knowing many of the people who came to the march also put her at ease.

After five months of planning, the event was over, a successful first year of the Walking Wounded 5k. People began to disperse toward their cars. Just like at the start of that day, she began to be pulled in different directions, people wanting to thank her, tell their story, or say goodbye.

August 18, 2014

Within six months of the PTSD march, Jessica found an internship opportunity that would continue to drive her toward a career of working with veterans. She began her internship

with Indianapolis VAMC Vocational Rehabilitation on August 18, 2014, as a vocational rehabilitation intern.

Dressed in a black flowery shirt with black dress pants and matching black flats, Jessica approached the Landmark building in downtown Indianapolis as a nervous intern. She rode the elevator to the ninth floor and met with her internship supervisor to discuss what she would do that day. To begin work, Jessica needed an ID badge, which she had to obtain from the VA hospital, a building that was not connected to the Landmark. Much of her first day was spent signing documents so she could have access to patient records as part of the internship. The first day was the boring, paperwork day. Once she began to counsel patients a few months into her internship, boredom was the furthest thing from her mind.

April 15, 2015

Some veterans Jessica works with on a regular basis and others she only sees a few times before referring the client to different counseling resources.

One such regular client is Joe,^{*84} who is in his late fifties and with whom she has been working since she started. Joe served during peacetime. He has been working on and off for much of his adult life and doesn't have the skills to keep up, which means he's constantly doing temporary work. Since she's been working with him, Jessica has been able to secure him a few jobs at warehouses, but he's not physically able to keep up with their pace. The longest he kept the job was for three months, then lost it.

⁸⁴ Name has been changed.

Soon after losing his job, he came into Jessica's office. Unsure if he was mad about the situation, she waited for him to speak.

"If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have even been able to get that job," he said. "Can you help me find another?"

Seeing him motivated to search for jobs and thanking me for not giving up on him has been all the reward I need to know that I love helping people, Jessica thought to herself, taking in the thankful moment.

"Let's submit your résumé online for other jobs," she said.

Joe didn't even know how to turn the computer on. Patiently, Jessica helped him through the process of filling out his work experience on the online résumé.

"Wow, I didn't even know I've done that much," he said.

Helping veteran clients, Jessica is able to share her own experiences with the person, relating to him or her as a fellow veteran. Many of her clients are older and don't immediately realize Jessica is also a Reserve veteran. Through the counseling conversations, Jessica said they are teaching her just as much as she teaches them. Helping others helps her healing process and moves Jessica forward in her readjustment.

Her internship lasted through May 1, 2015, one day before graduation from Ball State University with her master's degree in a field of work that came to fruition because of her deployment.

After, she plans to work full time there as a supported employment counselor in an office full of other veterans from different branches of the armed forces. As a veteran, this gives her the sense of camaraderie and a sense of belonging she had with her military unit.

EPILOGUE

Readjustment for veterans is unique to every individual. For some, it's over in a matter of months, but for others, it can take years. For Jessica, she feels that the readjustment will never end, but there will be a time when it's less adjusting and just figuring out how the "new her" works. When that time will be, she doesn't know.

Someday, she hopes to have her Ph.D. and open up a rehab facility for veterans, targeted at those who need help with PTSD, drug and alcohol addictions as well as other mental and vocational counseling services.

For now, she has her cap, gown and hood from her graduation day, May 2, 2015, six years after returning home from Iraq. With this master's degree, she is focused on a future working with veterans like herself and helping them through their readjustment periods, however long it may take. Even if she herself isn't yet completely healed.

SUMMARY/IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With this type of immersion journalism, it's important to establish trust with sources early on and to maintain that trust. It can be difficult depending on the topic for a subject to open up, which takes time. With Jessica, the author didn't initially ask to meet her family, even though that would need to happen eventually. The researcher waited for Jessica to offer her the opportunity, which happened sooner than expected. In the beginning of this type of interviewing,

it's tough. Jessica would more or less answer a question and not provide more. The author had to dig deeper and ask multiple questions to find out a little more information. But as time went on, she opened up and got to the point where "the source feels free to say almost anything and now makes the very best revelation of the interview."⁸⁵ It was in this trust the researcher and Jessica formed that allowed Jessica to open up to an in-depth narrative about herself.

Research was a driving part of this entire project. The researcher spent many months before even talking to Jessica, examining articles and news stories about the veteran readjustment. From graduate level courses, the author understood that the research would be a chapter within the narrative. Editors Kramer and Call point out that one "must digress from the running narrative to give necessary background information and frame your story."⁸⁶ The author chose to place this in chapter two after outlining Jessica's narrative and deciding that would be the right place to digress. This gave a foundation from which to understand Jessica.

Much of the research involved academic literature. Kramer and Call write that "journalists often argue the academic literature pertaining to their subjects is incomprehensible and of no use to them or their readers. Our job as journalists, however, is to encounter the unfamiliar and learn to understand it."⁸⁷ Research enriches the narrative and provides the background information needed for readers to understand the story. It enabled the interviewer to have better questions and to better understand Jessica's responses that were similar to what the author had read. For future literary journalism projects, the author recommends researching first and then talking to sources. It could be overwhelming trying to research and gather interview information at the same time.

⁸⁵ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 33.

⁸⁶ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 27.

⁸⁷ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 114.

The author also suggests that future writers read more about reconstructed scenes to better understand this type of writing. The only background the author had in this was from two graduate-level literary journalism courses. Looking back, the author wishes she had taken more time to read even more examples in order to have a solid understanding of how to write reconstructed scenes. “New journalists” like Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese are writers to read when learning about reconstructed scenes.

From this project, the researcher learned what it takes to write literary journalism. Not knowing the source beyond a newspaper article about Jessica, the author had to reconstruct all the scenes in the project but one, which made it very difficult. This was the hardest journalistic writing the researcher has encountered because she had to gather the most minute of details to reconstruct scenes. This meant asking a series of questions sometimes. For example: what color is the couch? What size is it? Where in the room was it? What was the material? This meant asking what the author felt were silly questions. But as Cheney points out, “don’t be afraid of “dumb” questions.”⁸⁸ Sometimes Jessica would slip into military acronyms that the researcher didn’t always know what they stood for, but had to ask to acquire the correct information. But “silly” questions can lead to your source being the teacher, which then leads him or her to opening up more because he or she has the chance to teach you, the interviewer.

In order to reconstruct a scene, the writer should conduct multiple interviews with those who were present and others who may have discussed the scene subsequently. Also, when possible, the writer should visit the site to note sensory and status details, along with any other description to aid in the reconstruction. For the author, this wasn’t possible for most of the story. For instance, she couldn’t go to Iraq, the house Jessica returned to is no longer in the family, and

⁸⁸ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 211.

the author couldn't see where Jessica lived with her ex-husband. Future researchers should be aware of this and understand the detailed questions that need to be asked.

The author had conversations with Jessica that could take thirty minutes just to describe every detail for a scene. This type of detail is very in-depth but necessary for this sort of writing. This also meant transcribing the interviews verbatim, which is an integral part to this project in order to make sure details are correct and to have the ability to go back and listen to Jessica or her family speak about past events to help with the reconstructed scenes. It also gave the researcher a chance to be able to focus on other relevant parts, like mannerisms, expressions, or the surrounding scenery, as suggested by other writers.⁸⁹ Estimating the total number of meetings for all those involved to be around thirty and it takes about two hours per hour to transcribe, the researcher's time and effort to transcribe recorded interviews totaled approximately ninety hours.

There are limits to this project that the author encountered throughout the months of working on it that could happen to future researchers as well. The first was accessibility to sources. For about half of the time, Jessica was on campus and easy to access. The second half, she was living out of the city, which meant more planning and re-scheduling to be able to talk. This made it more difficult to reach Jessica at the "felt life level." This is what Henry James described as the "level of informal comprehension that you have of your subject at the end of a day spent reporting."⁹⁰

There were also a couple brief periods throughout the months we talked where she didn't respond for a number of days. At one point, the researcher was afraid Jessica was going to say she didn't want to participate anymore. It's important to be prepared for situations like that

⁸⁹ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 28.

⁹⁰ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 26.

where your source may not respond for a bit or even having to cancel and reschedule meeting times. Sources and the researcher have lives outside of the project and it's important to take that into account. The various locations of Jessica's family members throughout Indiana also made it difficult to talk to them. This distance took more time to establish a relationship and to be available to meet in person than originally expected.

To counteract the access situation, when the author did spend time with Jessica, she worked hard to be as open as possible. Taking from other narrative writers, "you can't just sit there mutely and not share things from your own life. There has to be some give-and-take even though it can't ever be fair. As the weeks and months go by, you cannot remain a professional, distant iceberg."⁹¹ When the author had access to Jessica and could relate to an incident in her life, the author would try to do just that and show she wasn't just a journalist asking about Jessica's life. The author was a person Jessica could relate to and thus trust.

Another limitation of nonfiction is working with people's memories that may or may not line up with the other person who was present for that scene. The parts of the story that involved other people besides Jessica, the researcher would ask them about that scene and then go back and ask Jessica about that same scene also to corroborate the details. Often the details her family members couldn't quite remember, Jessica could or vice versa. The author also conversed a few times with Jessica and Jennifer at the same time, leading to each filling in the gaps the other couldn't remember. The author didn't run into contradictions, likely because it was hard enough for them to remember details from the past ten years.

⁹¹ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 43.

Suggestions for moving forward with this type of work include: flexibility, patience, and understanding the interview versus conversational approach. It's important with literary journalism to be flexible in the sense that you won't really know your story until you're almost done. The author had Jessica send her an outline of the major events in Jessica's life from deployment to graduation in May 2015. This is where the trust came in. The author had to trust Jessica that she was telling her all the major incidents that had happened in the span of those few years. (The researcher couldn't cover everything in a narrative of this size). When deciding on a structure, the author chose chronological order because of the amount of time covered in the narrative. It made the most sense and would be the easiest to follow. A sort of comfort for readers comes from linear development of structure.⁹² However, there were several instances as we were talking that Jessica added new parts of her life to the outline. The story kept evolving, forcing the author to re-work the chronological order. Flexibility by the author can make this easier to handle.

Another suggestion is to have patience. The researcher asked Jessica some of the same questions multiple times about some of the same instances just to be able to fill in all the gaps. People forget or maybe don't want to talk about something right away so it can take talking about a scene multiple times for Jessica to share everything.

A final suggestion for moving forward for those who will pursue a project such as this is to remember to have a conversation and not treat it so much like an interview. In the beginning, the author was guilty of doing this a few times because of previous journalistic training. Each ensuing time we met, the author usually had a topical area and would start with one open-ended question and then let Jessica just talk. Asking opened-ended questions, why, and simple

⁹² Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 150.

questions encouraged Jessica to open up, techniques Cheney suggests using.⁹³ The author asked follow-up questions where needed, but it was a very conversational approach every time. This was much more useful than interview style, allowing a connection with the source. This conversational approach has been used by other writers in the field as a way to deviate from the traditional Q & A interview style. One way to start the conversation is through organic methods by finding “something relevant to the situation, the setting, the day’s news (even the weather) to get the two of you talking in a relaxed way.”⁹⁴ These are ways our conversations started.

Overall, this type of journalism is well worth the many months it takes to produce. One of the most rewarding experiences the author had with this literary journalism project was toward the end when Jessica told the author that specifically because of talking with her for the project, Jessica decided to apologize to one of her former friends about how she acted when she returned from deployment. The friend responded and said she had been waiting for an apology for years. The researcher would like to think that she had a small role in that. Who knows if Jessica would have ever felt that desire to apologize or not? This reminded the researcher how important in-depth, immersion stories are to journalism and the impact they have. The author hopes future researchers continue to tackle these types of stories.

OUTSIDE EVALUATION #1

Submitted by Patricia Kime, Senior Staff Writer, Gannett Government Media, Inc.

I am a senior staff writer for Gannett Government Media, Inc., covering military health care and medicine for a group of newspapers and websites that cater to active duty service members, military retirees, veterans and their family members. I have worked as a reporter for more than 25 years, having covered a range of subjects, from municipal government and

⁹³ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 208.

⁹⁴ Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 206.

education to celebrity profiles, real estate, style and travel. I have covered military medicine since 2010, writing about health care for U.S. troops, including mental health conditions, traumatic brain injury, combat casualty care, suicide, fitness, diet and more. I also provide consumer health care information to military family members, retirees, reservists, the National Guard and veterans, covering news of the Defense Department's Tricare health care program as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers, clinics and administration.

I first became acquainted with the author, Sara Nahrwold, when she approached me for an interview on veterans' readjustment and post-traumatic stress disorder. Although I am not a subject matter expert on the topic, I have covered these subjects extensively and felt I could offer her an observer's perspective that she might find useful for her project.

War and its aftermath are subjects offering endless opportunities for exploration; Nahrwold chose to study the challenges facing service members when they return home and reintegrate into society. Her subject was a National Guardsman who joined the service as a teenager, deployed to Iraq for a year and returned home to Indiana. The soldier, Jessica Robinson, exemplifies the transition issues many troops face when they arrive home from an intense combat environment: they often face problems adjusting to family and home life, to daily routines and jobs, to their studies and making plans for the future. But Jessica also demonstrates an additional challenge, one not fully understood or explored by the mainstream media, the unique transition National Guard members and reservists experience when they arrive home, including an immediate loss of camaraderie when their units are dispersed or deactivated. This sudden loss support can contribute to a tremendous loss of identity, self-worth and camaraderie – factors that are much needed for future success.

While much has been written on the topic of transition, Nahrwold wisely chose to explore a facet of integration -- the reestablishment of veterans as students into college and university settings. Student veterans I have interviewed report feeling isolated and unable to identify or fit in with the younger students in their classes. They say they feel older than their classmates and are reluctant to befriend them because they feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences with those who have not been through similar experiences. Nahrwold identified this unique character of student veterans and sought to capture it with her study of Robinson, a master's degree candidate at Ball State University.

Jessica's story is ripe for being told in literary journalism form, from a beginning that describes the ennui of an unfocused high school student and early moments of her enlistment to deployment, a life-changing explosion, her homecoming, development of combat-related depression and PTSD and eventual success in her studies and career.

Nahrwold used a variety of techniques to relate Robinson's story, telling it in a narrative that uses direct quotes taken in interviews, facts from interviews and research and extensive reporting. She prefaces the narrative with an extensive introduction that guides the reader into the issues facing many veterans, including behavioral health conditions, isolation and reintegration challenges. She inserts a chapter into her narrative in which she explores the problems unique to student veterans in a detailed, well-researched section on veterans seeking post-secondary education.

The chapters that inform the reader of the issues facing veterans are well-researched, well-written and factually accurate. They are an informative primer of the issues that have faced post 9/11 veterans in a high operations tempo environment and the resources available to them in

academia, as well as developments in post-secondary education geared to improving services for student veterans. If I had to offer one constructive criticism of these sections – Chapter 2, specifically – is that the reader is taken abruptly out of the narrative style and into academic discourse that is unsettling, since the narrative resumes for the rest of the article. I would advise that the writer consider one of two approaches: either weave the valuable facts contained in the introduction and Chapter 2 into the narrative somehow or perhaps segment the information into alternating chapters so the reader can hit a rhythm of sorts (narrative chapter, academic chapter, narrative chapter, academic chapter). It may sound formulaic, but the style would provide readers some idea of what to expect and carry them through the article.

I admire the author's extensive research and understanding of writing techniques such as immersion, participate observation, saturation reporting, digression and background research. Nahrwold herself admits how challenging writing creating non-fiction is: it combines all the complications of writing a novel with the intense research and fact-finding of great reporting. Nahrwold obviously conducted exhaustive research and has the material to craft a good story. I would suggest, as she says herself, that she read more examples of solid literary journalism and creative non-fiction to improve the ebb and flow of her content. Some of the greats in my immediate field that she should read and emulate include the works of David Wood, Pulitzer Prize winner at the Huffington Post, Sebastian Junger and Mark Bowden. Outside of my field – and I can see that Nahrwold has the potential to develop a style and voice similar to his – I would suggest reading everything by Eric Larsen, in particular, *Devil In the White City* and *Dead Wake*. The phrase “education by imitation” holds true for nearly every writer. Find authors you admire, study their work and craft and understand their framework, which can be used as a lattice to find your own voice and develop your work.

The author's attention to content and factual information is admirable. The story is interesting and we feel for Jessica as she enters a world with which she is unfamiliar and is exposed to experiences we never imagined. We watch helplessly as she spirals into anger, anxiety and depression and makes terrible mistakes, such as getting married to someone she doesn't love, because she feels isolated and alone. We share her frustration when she does not receive empathy or assistance in a doctor's office at the Veterans Affairs hospital. A couple of observations regarding quality, however: I would advise using a writing style guide (either Chicago, AP style) and sticking to it. While her citations are accurate and the academic portions of this work appear to be written to a style, the narrative portions are not and they should be, because small details, like not capitalizing names like the 38th Military Police Company or Crown and Coke, and using army upper-case and lower-case, can be distracting.

A few other small observations that probably are my own editorial pet-peeves and I apologize to the panel for what could be my personal foibles: there are multiple instances where Nahrwold uses repetitive verbs and phrasing ("The squad immediately radioed in **to let base know** they had been hit. As soon as they heard who it was, Jessica's squad leader **let the squad know**") where I think she could enliven the narrative by finding different verbs, and she uses forms of "get" – an extremely weak verb that should be avoided in dynamic writing – too frequently. Also, my recommendation – something I learned early on that vastly improved my writing – would be to read the entire work aloud and "hear" the flow. This helps the writer pick up awkward phrasing or run-on sentences. For example, the descriptions of Edith and Alicia in the following sentence could be placed elsewhere in the article, allowing this sentence to read better and placing the descriptions in a more appropriate location: "Her two-year-old niece and five-year-old nephew embraced her in brief hugs while her mother, Edith, with medium length

red hair peppered with gray and a talkative personality, her twin sister, Jennifer, and her younger sister, Alicia, a sophomore in high school at the time with short blonde hair and a quiet demeanor, also gave her quick embraces.”

As stated previously, Nahrwold, through her extensive reporting, has found a powerful story. She learned the value of multiple interviews and fact-checking and obviously knows the power of a dynamic quote. (“*It’s my fault,*” she said, weeping to her sister. “*It was supposed to be me and not them. They shouldn’t be dead. I should,*” and “*She went my sister,*” she barely croaked out, tears overwhelming her again. “*And came back my biggest hero.*”) Her academic writing is rock-solid and her narrative demonstrates the attention to detail necessary for quality literary journalism. Given that few, if any, writers are covering the circumstances facing reserve and National Guard members, as well as student veterans, Nahrwold’s story moves the discussion forward, forcing us to ask questions as to how we as a community can help ease the transition and better support the millions who have served in the nation’s longest wars. I want to commend Nahrwold on her gumshoe reporting, for delving into a topic that few civilians understand or cover accurately without having at least some familiarity with the U.S. military, and for bringing us into Jessica’s world. The final chapter shows that veterans can reintegrate successfully, and while some do it on their own, it often takes a community of support to ease the transition.

OUTSIDE EVALUATION #2

Submitted by Lieutenant Colonel Kelly Rosenberger, professor of military science, Ball State University

I. Brief discussion of evaluator's credentials (e.g., knowledge and experience of the subject area)

- a. I presently serve as the Professor of Military Science, Ball State University. I hold a Bachelor of Science degree in Anthropology, Ball State University, Master of Science in Administration- Cum Laude, University of Notre Dame, and projected to graduate from the United States Army War College with a Masters of Strategic Studies in July 2015. I was commissioned as an Infantry Officer in 1990 from Ball State University into the Indiana Army National Guard where I have served in leadership positions from platoon leader to Brigade Deputy Commander.
- b. I deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom as a Company Commander from 2005-2006 where I was awarded the Bronze Star Medal, Combat Infantryman Badge, and Meritorious Unit Commendation. I was assigned as part of a Police Transition Team training the Iraqi Police in Sadr City, Hillah, Najaf, and Diwanyah.
- c. Upon returning from deployment, I witnessed the struggles of my own soldiers in both their professional and personal lives. Also, I served as the Indiana National Guard's Deputy J1 developing systems to provide medical care and benefits for soldiers.
- d. I presently serve as the Professor of Military Science interacting with Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC) Cadets, veterans, faculty, and veteran service agencies.

II. Relationship to the student and subject matter

- a. I was asked by Sara Nahrwold to provide an outside review of her Master's project, "College Student-Soldiers: the impact of readjustment of an Army Veteran."

- b. As the Professor of Military Science and an Army leader, I understand that this is an issue among or current members of the Armed Forces and our veteran population.

III. Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

- a. Jessica Robinson's story is just one of many veteran service members. I do have concerns that Sara did do due diligence in verifying the subjects story. This will further provide the data in supporting her findings and assertions. Secondly, Jessica was a member of the Indiana Army National Guard with a different and sometimes more complex issues connected with her service versus "Active Army" as she asserts in her title.
- b. I have further concerns that Sara does not discuss the subjects social and economic background to include her childhood, family dynamics, and economic factors that may have contributed or not contributed to the subject's development into adulthood. Personally, I grew up in Connersville, Indiana and have family that still live in this town that is faced with high unemployment and other challenges that may form a better understanding of the subject.

IV. Evaluation of the student's approach

- a. The student's approach is thoughtful, organized, and easy to follow. She uses established data and trends that are directly tied to the subject's assertions. Again, the subject is a member of the reserve component and she should have focused her study around the challenges and obstacles of a veteran of the reserve component versus leading the reader to believe that the subject is an active duty service member.
- b. Again, I have concerns to ensure that Sara collaborated and verified the subject's story. Interviews with individuals directly connected with the subject would verify,

but strengthen her assertions. Interviews with the Company Commander, family members, teachers, ex-husband, friends, and comrades would not only demonstrate the impact on the subject, but those connected to the subject.

V. Evaluation of the body of the project

a. Quality

1. Sara provides solid information through journals and articles in relating to the issues facing our veteran students. As the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan draw down, what are the implications for our service members, families, universities, and the society?
2. Verifying service records, collaborating statements, stories, and assertions are key in scholarly publications. I believe that this has not been done. With the rise of “Stolen Valor” and the implications of possible embarrassment, fact checking is very important. Verifying service records and diagnosis of PTSD directly related to the deployment would further protect the integrity of the project.

b. Depth of treatment.

1. As mentioned earlier, I have concerns with the subject and Sara’s due diligence in verifying her story, but providing further depth the impact of her service with those around her.
2. Confusing her service with the Active Army and that of the Indiana Army National Guard is significant. Her analysis should have directly been tied to the reserve component members and the challenges faced. Support systems, obstacles, challenges, and implications are all important and well documented. Failing to address this is significant.

VI. Evaluation of the student's work as contributing to the field.

- a. This project has potential in contributing to significantly to the field; however, several issues must be resolved, verified, and directly tied to the subject's service not as a member of the active component, but the reserve component. The integrity of the project and its author must be the foremost in establishing this project of true substance and contribution to the field.

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